

Homily at Mass of Christian Burial for Bishop Andrew J. McDonald

The following homily was preached by Msgr. J. Gaston Hebert, PA, at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock on Tuesday, April 8, 2014.

Readings:

Exodus 18:13-23

1st Corinthians 4:1-5

John 14:15-21

“If you love me and obey the commandments I give you, I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you always.” (John 14: 15-16)

That is quite a promise that Jesus made! Using hindsight, we can now discern the promised presence of the Holy Spirit as He formed the living body of Christ, our Church, in the state of Arkansas.

Being infinite in wisdom, even prior to our first bishop, the Spirit sent primarily French priests to the area, who with their distinct blend of intellect and charm, sewed the original seeds of faith, with Father Jacques Gravier celebrating the first Mass in Arkansas in 1700.

The first priest assigned to work in Arkansas, Father Nicholas Foucault, died a martyr at the hands of a segment of the Quapaw Indians, to whom he had ministered.

143 years after that first Mass, the pope created the Diocese of Little Rock in 1843, and in the following year named its first bishop, Bishop Andrew Byrne, a native born Irishman, the pastor of St. Andrew’s Church in New York City. Thus began the Irish ecclesiastical deluge.

The task before him was gigantic, but with Irish tenacity, faith, and love of the Church, Bishop Byrne traversed the state on foot or horseback in 1845, a trip that unearthed no more than 700 Catholics spread throughout the entire state. It is difficult to imagine what Bishop Byrne must have endured in this state referred to

by his contemporary Father Beauprez as a “suburb of hell.” By November of 1846, the good bishop had built our first Cathedral of St. Andrew at Second and Center Sts., even though he wrote, “While I do not need to go to New York, I do not wish to stay in my diocese.”

The Holy Spirit does not guide the progress of the Church, nor the consequent salvation of souls upon the like or dislikes, preferences or aversions, of its clergy. To Bishop Byrne’s eternal credit, he struggled on, planting the seeds of Catholicism in a state that had become increasingly hostile towards Catholics.

One of his greatest achievements was going to Ireland and bringing back four sisters and five postulants of the Sisters of Mercy in 1851, whose nuns have been a strategic part of the Spirit’s plan for our Church in Arkansas through hospitals and schools for 163 years.

In 1862, Bishop Byrne died and another native born Irishman Father Patrick Reilly was made administrator of the diocese, a position he held for five years partially during the Civil War — and I thought I had it bad with two years until our second bishop — of course, another Irishman, Edward Fitzgerald, who had at first declined the pope’s appointment as our bishop, was made an offer by the Holy Father he couldn’t refuse (mandamus — “we command”).

Can you imagine ... nobody wanted to go to Arkansas? He had only six priests in the entire diocese to spread the Word and care for his flock. But the Irish are not easily deterred: he built churches, increased his clergy, overcame enormous obstacles and worked through his own chronic depression to serve the diocese.

He even built and consecrated this cathedral and dedicated it 1881, 133 years ago. The Holy Spirit always has the last laugh: the bishop who did everything he knew not to come here, pleaded not to come, ended up serving the diocese for 40 years. Maybe the Israelites didn’t have it so bad in the dessert after all.

While our third bishop, John Baptist Morris, was not from Ireland, he was of Irish stock. The Holy Spirit guided him to build upon the work of his predecessors. He was a natural builder and the effects of his efforts are seen here in Little Rock at our present St. John Catholic Center, formerly the highly esteemed St. John Home Mission Seminary he had formed.

He also made critical financial decisions and land acquisitions, which would fund much of the work to be accomplished by his next two successors.

I do not know what happened in 1947, a non-Irishman — in fact, an “Arkie” — became the fourth bishop of Little Rock. And, you know, the power of the Holy Spirit even worked through him. He was gentle, kind, folksy. He actually got behind a mule and planted vegetables to help feed the seminarians during World War II.

He steered the helm of the ship when words like “authority” and “obedience” became bad words in society, politically, educationally, even ecclesiastically, and in what must have been the saddest duty of his life, Bishop Fletcher had to close St. John Home Mission Seminary in 1967.

Guiding the Church as a bishop often means enduring pain and misunderstanding. In the wake of Vatican II, the diocesan see was uneasy with conflict and turmoil. Bishop Fletcher realized what St. Paul wrote in the second reading today was true: it was God who would pass judgment as to whether he had been a trustworthy administrator, and the rest really didn’t matter. His successor was soon to discover that truth also.

It was 1972 when, Andrew J. McDonald, the fourth Irishman out of five bishops, was named the fifth bishop of the Diocese of Little Rock. The Spirit called him to leave the security and comfort zone of being surrounded by parishioners, family, and brother priests in Savannah, Ga., who loved and admired him to become a bishop where he was unknown, and frankly, viewed initially as I once told him, an “interloper.”

He entered, as I would imagine every bishop did at the time, an ecclesiastical war zone, where those who expected too little and those who expected too much from Vatican II were squared off against one another. The grandeur and triumphalism that had once accompanied the office of the bishop was on its last leg — what essentially remained were the problems and challenges that had always been a part of being a bishop.

He made me aware of the change when I met him for the first time on the sidewalk across from this cathedral prior to his installation on Sept. 7, 1972. I started to

kneel to kiss his ring. Pulling me to my feet with a hint of admonishment in his eyes, he warmly shook my hand and made one of those little jokes that would become one of his trademarks. The times ... the paradigm of the model of the Church and its bishops ... they were “achangin’.”

Here was a priest sent by the Holy Spirit to breathe new life into the Diocese of Little Rock, to implement the changes and the vision of Vatican II in a diocese and state known for its conservative approach to almost everything. For 400 years little had changed in the universal Church, its approach to spreading and living the Gospel, and its administration of the sacraments.

And, frankly, that was the way most of us liked it. And along came Andrew J. McDonald with a big bag full of ideas — actually those of the Church about changing altars around, the use of the vernacular, reconciliation rooms, inclusiveness, shared responsibility, catechesis, the educational system, liturgical changes, and on and on. We Arkies thought he’d “stopped preachin’ and gone to meddlin’.”

The design of the Spirit becomes more obvious in sending this strong, intelligent, hard-headed, stubborn Irishman, capable of holding his ground and standing up for what he knew was right for our Church, right for the sheep he was sent to shepherd, and what he knew in his heart was the will of God as expressed through the authority of the Church he served and loved.

Because of that he was willing to endure the reticent, even at times ugly and disrespectful, attitude of those he was trying to lead to Christ. He chose God’s will over popularity. Upon his arrival in the diocese, Bishop McDonald stated, “With God’s help, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I will live and, if necessary, I will die to prove that I care; to prove that I love.”

Those were not empty words. The motto on his episcopal coat of arms stated: “Ave Crux” — “Behold the Cross.” There were times when some felt that Bishop McDonald was himself the crux, only to learn later that the cross referred to the one that he courageously bore in order to lead our diocese closer to the Lord during a time of turmoil within the Church.

It is remarkable how the Spirit uses the experiences of our lives in forming us to be instruments of salvation for others. Being one of 12 children taught Bishop Andrew that the good of the whole can only be accomplished through the efforts of the many.

As Jethro advised his son-in-law, Moses, in the first reading to appoint others so that his tasks would not overwhelm him and just as Jesus had called for the original Andrew to follow him, Bishop McDonald used the concept of shared responsibility that he had experienced in his own family to continue the work of Christ in Arkansas.

He enlisted the aid of clergy, religious, and laity to address the needs of the diocese. While in the past the governance of our diocese had been in the hands of the bishop and a small diocesan staff, advisory boards were formed touching every segment of diocesan life.

The exodus of the clergy, accounting for a loss of 22% in our diocese between 1965 and 1990 was addressed through a presbyteral council, clergy welfare and personnel boards, continuing education, a vibrant vocations' department, St. John's Manor for retired priests, and a more receptive ear to the needs of his clergy.

The burden caused by the shortage of priests was lightened when Bishop McDonald instituted a program for the formation of permanent deacons, who have since served with humility and dedication in our institutions, parishes, and within the diocesan staff.

The religious education of the laity saw enormous growth as Catholics were actually encouraged to open their Bibles and to read, study, and pray. The Little Rock Scripture Study program was instituted and spread beyond our diocese, throughout our country, and was translated in many diverse languages for use around the globe.

The Cursillo movement, Marriage Encounter, Pre-Cana, Retrouvaille, Renew, Call to Action, and the Charismatic movement became just a part of the programs offered to help the laity know, love, and serve God.

Having four sisters who were nuns, the welfare of religious women was always a top priority for Bishop McDonald. And, just as Bishop Byrne brought the Mercy order to Arkansas, Bishop McDonald invited now Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta to bring her Missionaries of Charity to Abba House, a place where unwed mothers and women in need might find a home.

That, however, was only a part of his efforts in favor of protection for the life of the unborn. He helped establish Birthright, St. Joseph's Workers, and the annual pro-life march in January, and he was always there for the march, rain or snow, to pray and draw attention to the dignity of the life of the unborn.

Bishop McDonald's compassion was further evidenced in his care for the Vietnamese who came to our diocese after the fall of South Vietnam, and the Latinos who came in search of a better life for their families, and through his encouragement of Father Joe Biltz in his efforts in establishing Peace and Justice.

To mention all the accomplishments of this bishop in the 28 years he served as our ordinary would place me in jeopardy of being forcibly evicted from this pulpit — or to have some of the laity awakened by the snores of the clergy.

Suffice it to say, without him there would not be sufficient clergy to serve our parishes — he had the foresight to enlist the aid of both the religious orders and our wonderful Nigerian priests; without him, there would be few diocesan offices or programs and we would lack sufficient funds to educate our 40 or so seminarians (Thank you, God!) or funds to support our retired priests (a personal note of thanks to him for that) — nor would we have an enhanced and expanded St. John Catholic Center, the hub of Catholic life in our diocese.

When I was honored to serve as administrator for our diocese, I discovered how absolutely remarkable the diocesan staff that Bishop McDonald had assembled really are. Bishop McDonald had three secretaries over the years that enabled him to be all that he became as our ordinary. Martha McNeill, Liz Parker, and Marian Grant-Swift should all be awarded honorary miters for what they did for us through Bishop McDonald.

Nostalgically we will remember Bishop McDonald for his Irish wit, his little sheepish smile, his horrid jokes and puns, the half wave accompanied by mischievous grin as

he processed down the aisle, his compassion for the suffering (particularly his brother priests), the reverence he had for his deceased parents, the love he had for his siblings and their families (here with us today) and his sorrow as all eleven proceeded him in death, his adequate golf game, the manner in which he multiplied his homilies on a given occasion (often as many as three), his dinner parties, where he took elfish delight in requiring his guests to try a sip of fernet branca, an evil tasting Italian liquor — just to relish the surprised look of pain on their faces, and above all else that wonderful horse laugh.

This loving priest, this caring bishop brought peace to our diocese. While we Arkies had to sniff around him for a while to make sure he was genuine, he won us over — BIG TIME! Yes, he became loved and respected by laity, religious, and clergy — because he kept his promise to show by his service that he loved us and cared about us.

Oh, perhaps he didn't always make the right decision or say the right word (unlike you and me), but doesn't that simply underscore the fact that I'm trying to establish: that it was really the work of the Holy Spirit who used imperfect instruments, all of our bishops, including Andrew J. McDonald, as links in His plan to strengthen the life of the Church. The remains of Byrne, Fitzgerald, Morris, Fletcher ... and now McDonald will rest together in the crypt of this Cathedral, links in a chain forged by the Holy Spirit for your salvation and mine.

The Spirit carried on his work among us in J. Peter Sartain, now Archbishop of Seattle, who shared his wisdom, kindness, and guidance with us like a shooting star, here and gone, but leaving a sense that we experienced something wonderful and holy.

And now the Spirit works through Anthony Basil Taylor, Bishop of Little Rock, whose heart and aims are so in line with those of His Holiness Pope Francis we know without confusion or doubt the direction of the Church, and that living out the Gospel of Christ impels us to care for the needs of Christ in the poor and defenseless.

There is a line from Shakespeare's "Macbeth," spoken by Malcom of his father King Duncan: "Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it." Regardless of his multitudinous accomplishments as our bishop, nothing so became Bishop Andrew

J. McDonald like leaving his miter and crozier behind to humbly serve the sick and dying with the Little Sisters of the Poor at St. Joseph Home in Palatine, Ill. The responsibilities and crosses of the episcopacy had served to form a good, simple, humble, joyful, loving priest of God ... who still desired to live and die in such a manner as to prove that he loved and cared.

“Now, O Lord, let your servant go in peace. For your word — your promise of the Spirit has been fulfilled ...”

Lent is over for Bishop Andrew J. McDonald, and an eternal Easter has begun.