



Archdiocese
of Toronto

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**Homily of Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto
175th Anniversary of the Archdiocese of Toronto: May 30th, 2017**

Another step forward, heading home to the New Jerusalem

On December 17th, 1841, Pope Gregory XVI divided the Diocese of Kingston, and appointed Michael Power, a priest of Montreal, as the first Bishop of the new Diocese of Toronto, which encompassed south western Ontario, an area that now includes not only the current Archdiocese of Toronto, but also the Dioceses of Hamilton, London, and St Catharines which, with the Diocese of Thunder Bay, make up the Ecclesiastical Province of Toronto.

On this 175th anniversary we look back gratefully to the saintly example of those who have gone before us, and learn from them as we seek in our own day to proclaim the Kingdom of God, fulfilling the great commission that inspired them: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28: 19-20) We follow in the tradition of the evangelical zeal of New France, and of the holy Jesuit martyrs who offered their life for Christ within our diocese, and whose sacrifice inspires us to this day at Martyrs’ Shrine in Midland. Before becoming the first bishop of Ontario in Kingston, from which our diocese was separated in 1841, the great Alexander Macdonell was Vicar General of Bishop Plessis of Quebec, as our first bishop was Vicar General of Bishop Bourget of Montreal. We look back with gratitude to this heritage, which is still reflected in our diocese.

Below the altar of this cathedral is the tomb of our saintly first bishop, Michael Power, who began the construction of this church which he designed to be a sign of our faith, a beacon of welcome, and a gateway to heaven, as it has continued to be from the time when Toronto was a small town with a few thousand inhabitants to the present when St Michael’s Cathedral Basilica is a spiritual oasis in the heart of a great metropolis. He died at the age of 43 on October 1, 1847, sacrificing his life in caring for the refugees from the great Irish famine. From him we learn that sanctity comes from sacrifice and service. We learn to reach out to those who are rejected by society. We also learn from him to welcome those who come from afar, often seeking refuge, and who enrich so much the life of our community.

I intend to initiate the cause for canonization for Bishop Power, and will be seeking to identify and present for the judgement of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints other laity, religious, and clergy through whose lives of holiness the light of Christ has shone among us.

Also buried in the crypt chapel, along with many of the laity who were pioneers of our faith, are Loretto Sisters, from the first community of women religious of our diocese, who were invited by Bishop Power to come from Ireland to Canada in 1847, and who also gave their lives in holy service. Above their tomb, at the entrance to the crypt chapel, is a statue of the three women at the foot of the cross, whose faith, hope, and love set the standard for us all. We also call to mind the Sisters of St Joseph, whose work continues through three great health care centres, St. Michael's, St Joseph's, and Providence, and in other apostolic endeavours.

In 1852, our second Bishop, Bishop de Charbonnel, invited the Basilian Fathers to establish St Michael's College in a wing of the bishop's residence. Over the years many other religious congregations of men and women have come to our diocese to serve the people of God in this area. The diocesan priests, and more recently the permanent deacons, have from the beginning offered their lives with outstanding devotion in loving pastoral care of the faithful. We all have reason to be most grateful for the dedication of all who over the years have served the people of our diocese.

It is the laity of the diocese who for over 175 years have been the vibrant heart of our community. From a few, mainly Irish parishioners of the early days to a community of over two million members today, from all over the world, the lay faithful of the diocese proclaim Christ in a society which has always been, to greater or lesser degrees, a mission territory in need of evangelization, and resistant to it. Those who gather around the altar of the Lord in our 225 parishes are called and sent to reach out to the scattered, to those who have drifted away from the practice of the faith, to those who are seeking God in a confusing world, and to those who in any way are suffering, physically, mentally, or spiritually.

All of us need guidance and inspiration in our mission of discipleship, and we find that in our encounter with Christ, who not only commissioned His first disciples to make disciples of all the nations, through word and sacrament, but who also promised that he would be with them to the end of the age. It is appropriate that we celebrate this anniversary in the week between the liturgical feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. In the Ascension we learn that Jesus withdraws, so that we might ourselves be sent out to make him present in the world; and at Pentecost we rejoice in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, whom we receive at Baptism and Confirmation and, for some of us, at Ordination, and through whom as disciples of Jesus we proclaim the Kingdom of the Heavenly Father.

The readings of today's Mass instruct us in our mission.

In the Gospel today we hear of the mandate given to Peter to be the rock upon which Jesus will build his Church. In the Art Gallery of Ontario there is a painting by the great artist, William Kurelek, who was a parishioner of Corpus Christi parish, in which the rock upon which the Church rests securely is surrounded by a raging sea of iniquity, which beats against the base of the rock. That is the double reality which is the context of the earthly life of Christians: the reality of evil, violence, and indifference to God and to those who are in need, and the infinitely greater reality of the rock of Divine Providence recognized through faith, which gives us hope, and energizes us for loving and effective action.

First there is the reality of sin in all its forms. We know that Peter the rock would soon deny His Lord, and that the disciples would flee. The Church is a church of sinners, and always has been. It has wisely been said: if you seek a perfect Church, when you find it, join it; on that day it will cease to be a perfect Church. We also know that Jesus faced hostility from the world around him, manifest in his conflict with the leaders of the people in the passage just before today's Gospel, and most obviously in his crucifixion.

That hostility, which is the enduring earthly context for the proclamation of the Good News of Christ, the Light who came into the darkness, is rooted to some degree in human weakness and original sin, in the pride that corrupts the human heart. But we would be fools if we ignored the cosmic dimension of the hostility to Jesus and his Church. In today's Gospel Jesus identifies this ecclesial fact of life when he promises Peter that the "gates of Hades" will not prevail against his church.

In recognition of this cosmic context, we do well each day to pray the prayer composed by Pope Leo XIII in the late 19th century, addressed to our patron, Saint Michael. Pope Leo saw to the heart of iniquity, and prophetically grasped the challenge of the centuries to come, in a prayer deeply rooted in Sacred Scripture: "St Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls." Evil is real, and rampant. We were reminded of that only last week, in the bombing in Manchester, and in a particular way in the martyrdom of the Coptic pilgrims in Egypt who, like so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world, shed their blood for Christ, and who, like Peter at the end, refused to deny him.

But today's Gospel above all reveals the second and greater reality: the triumph of Christ and the irresistible power of Divine Providence in which we trust, as did our heroic predecessors in the faith whom we gratefully commemorate on this 175th anniversary. Jesus makes Peter the rock, as Jesus is himself the ultimate rock of our faith. And the gates of Hades shall not prevail.

We gain further insight into our mission of discipleship in this current age from our first reading, from the Apocalypse; it is the book of martyrs, written in a time of persecution not unlike the persecution of the Church today. Some of it was violent: we hear in the Apocalypse of Christians dying for Christ. But some of it was, as is the case now, more subtle, much more subtle, but no less real: the persecution found in a sophisticated society that has lost its way, like our own, and which cannot abide Christian faith, or even human reason.

A few of the Christians of the Apocalypse faced the prospect of dying for Christ. Far more Christians face that prospect today. But most, like us, were threatened not by physical but by moral and spiritual danger, and the temptation to get along by going along with an attractive civilization bedecked with dazzling material accomplishments, but which at its heart was in the icy grip of the culture of death, in which people are treated like things, and considered disposable. This is Babylon the Great, the City of Man that Augustine later contrasted with the City of God.

Against that context of daily struggle, St John of the Apocalypse at the end of his great visionary prophecy shows us the New Jerusalem, coming down in splendor: “And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: “See, the home of God is among humans.” He will dwell with them as their God.”

Saint John reminds us that although at the moment we live in Babylon, which can never be our lasting home, we are citizens of the New Jerusalem, and must act accordingly.

The vision in our first reading both challenges and encourages the Church, and each individual disciple.

The vision of the New Jerusalem challenges, because it forces us to examine our consciences honestly to identify the city in which we are truly at home. The New Jerusalem sets the standard. Certainly we are to be faithful citizens of whatever state we find ourselves in, and St Paul himself tells us to honour the emperor. But no state owns us: no state or earthly institution has the right to extend its reach into every area of life, into the totality of life. The City of Man is legitimate to the extent that it recognizes itself to be limited and relative, at the service of the citizens, but not their master. In the days of the wicked King Henry VIII, Saint Thomas More proclaimed that fact in a state that had indeed become totalitarian in its reach when he declared himself on the scaffold to be the king’s good servant, but God’s first.

Our great challenge in witnessing to Jerusalem while living in Babylon is that the more obvious judicial and governmental struggles in which we are engaged - as in abortion, euthanasia, conscience protection, gender ideology, the undermining of marriage, and so on - are simply symptomatic of a deeper cultural confusion: in this secular age the whole of our culture has become unhinged from both supernatural revelation and natural reason. We need not merely to resist the more obvious intrusions of the state, but to address the underlying issue of a society that in academia, social media, the press, music, and in all of the tidal forces of popular culture, has bought into the corrosive exaltation of the individual will over the ordered harmony of natural law. That discord is the context of our mission as disciples of Jesus. We need to enter deeply into silent prayer, to reason clearly to see the true nature of the disorder, to plan effectively to find the ways to heal our culture, to reflect humbly and creatively on how to be persuasive in our proclamation of the Gospel, and most of all to witness courageously to the alternative path of Christian love manifest in a virtuous life. It is indeed better to light one candle than simply to curse the darkness.

The vision of the New Jerusalem not only challenges us, but also encourages us in our life of discipleship in the Church. It is the goal towards which we are moving, a kingdom of harmony focused on the Lamb upon the Throne of the Heavenly Father. If we know where we are going, we are more likely to get there, and the New Jerusalem is where we are going.

St John does not, however, simply see the heavenly city as a promised land in the future, the goal towards which we aim; he sees it descending *now* into Babylon the Great. To the extent that we live in communion with the Lamb of God now, in our

homes and parishes and diocese, and in the universal Church, to that extent the New Jerusalem is already here to be experienced, and most sublimely in the Holy Eucharist, in which the frontier between heaven and earth vanishes. With joyful boldness we set out from the Eucharist into our contemporary world, like Bishop Power setting out to serve the dying in the fever sheds along the lakeshore in that horrible summer of 1847, bringing the experience of heaven to those who were suffering that hell. That is our mission, and always has been, and always will be. In that we find our purpose. In that we find our joy.

Nothing can discourage, and nothing can deter, the Christian whose heart is set on the New Jerusalem.

In the second reading today, St Paul writes to the feuding Christians of the church of Corinth, who were squabbling over what approach to discipleship they should follow, with some for Apollos, some for Peter, some for Paul. This is not unlike the Gospel, where Jesus asks the disciples to tell him who people say that he is: some said John the Baptist, some said Elijah, some said Jeremiah. Jesus and Paul both respond to this ecclesial discord in words that are reflected in a hymn I have long appreciated: "Let strife among us be unknown, let all contention cease: be Christ's the glory that we seek, be ours his holy peace."

In the passage that precedes today's reading, Paul urges the Christians of Corinth to place their life in its proper context: the providence of God. One person plants, and another waters, but God gives the growth. That's a great motto for life, which would banish many worries and many fights. As Pope John XXIII supposedly said as he worried about the problems of the Church: "Well Lord. It's your Church. You take care of it. I'm going to bed." God gives the growth; once we realize that, we can rise above our narcissistic insecurities, and destructive rivalries.

The more we center our lives as individuals and as a church upon Christ, in the silence of prayer, trusting in divine providence, the more fruitful we will be in our life of discipleship. With strife in our hearts, and in the Church, and in the world in which we live, now is the time to enter deep within the temple of God, in silent personal prayer and in the intimate encounter with Christ in word and sacrament, and especially in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, and in Eucharistic Adoration, which should be emphasized in every parish in the diocese.

In this world in which God has placed us, nothing superficial will be sufficient; we must go deep into the silent encounter with God in which our illusions are dispelled, and which alone will impel us into fruitful action. Paul tells the Christians of Corinth, so caught up in useless things: "Do you not know that you are God's temple. And that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

We as a church are that temple, and from that temple we are sent out with joyful boldness to bring the healing experience of the Good News of Christ to the world in which God has placed us.

We journey through this world of Babylon, on our way home to Jerusalem, rejoicing in the mission the Lord has entrusted to us as individuals and as a Church. St

Augustine, who saw the City of Man crumble before his eyes, but whose heart was set on Jerusalem, the City of God, and who is more alive today than any Emperor or triumphant Vandal king of his time, summed up our Christian disposition in words which are aptly used in the final week of Ordinary time in the Divine Office, and which express our disposition as Christians homeward bound with joyful boldness, singing as we go:

“O the happiness of the heavenly alleluia, sung in security, in fear of no adversity! We shall have no enemies in heaven, we shall never lose a friend. God’s praises are sung both there and here, but here they are sung in anxiety, there, in security; here they are sung by those destined to die, there, by those destined to live forever; here they are sung in hope, there in hope’s fulfilment; here they are sung by wayfarers, there by those living in their own country.

So then, my brothers and sisters, let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors. You should sing as wayfarers do – sing, but continue your journey. Do not be lazy, but sing to make your journey more enjoyable. Sing, but keep going. What do I mean by keep going? Keep on making progress. This progress, however, must be in virtue; for there are some, the Apostle warns, whose only progress is in vice. If you make progress, you will be continuing your journey, but be sure that your progress is in virtue, true faith, and right living. Sing then, but keep going.” (Sermon 256)