



Homily given by
His Eminence Cardinal
Gérald Cyprien Lacroix
Archbishop of Quebec
Primate of Canada

EPISCOPAL ORDINATION OF
HÉCTOR FELIPE VILA
BISHOP OF WHITEHORSE
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« *Here I am, send me !* »

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today's Scripture presents us with three different characters, and each of them, when confronted with the greatness, the goodness and the holiness of God, felt inadequate and became keenly aware of their unworthiness.

Peter, upon seeing the two boats nearly sink from the miraculous catch of fish, sees Jesus in a new way. He falls to his knees and says : « *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man !* » His response echoes the prophet Isaiah, who is confronted with God's majesty shining forth and filling the Temple. Isaiah says : « *Woe to me ! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.* »

Paul, in the second reading, is clearly taken aback, aware that God chose him ; he says : « *For I am the least of the Apostles, unfit to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God.* » All of us, I think, can identify with Peter, Isaiah and Paul, when we come to that deep awareness of our inadequacy, our insufficiency to answer God's call. Being humble enough to recognize our shortcomings and the littleness of our lives is a good thing. It keeps us in tune with

reality. But sometimes, we can get stuck there, feeling that our flaws disqualify us from really answering God's call and serving the Lord when He calls on us.

Yet our biblical readings today paint another picture, one that offers us consolation and hope. They speak of a God who comes to us and calls us, not because we are « good enough », but because of who God is : « *God is love* ». This is the God who is passionately in love with us, who not only forgives us, but uses our weaknesses to do wonderful things for gathering others in the net of his love and mercy. Look at Paul : the same person who persecuted Christians was forgiven, and in that power was called by Christ to go out and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Look at Peter : an often stubborn and seemingly fair-weather friend, who denied Jesus three times after promising otherwise, who turned and wept for his failure. This is the same person whom Jesus called to lead his Church, to preach and heal.

Look closely at those whom God has called down through the centuries. I read something on Facebook a few months ago that made me realize that our God works in strange ways. « God does not call the qualified. He qualifies the called ! Jacob was a cheater, Peter had a temper, David had an affair, Jonah ran from God, Gideon was insecure, Myriam was a gossip, Martha was a worrier, Thomas was a doubter, Sara was impatient, Elijah was moody, Moses stuttered, Zacchaeus was too short, Abraham was old, and Lazarus was dead. » All had their shortcomings; all were sinners. Yet God worked through them as He wants to work through us – touching us and transforming us : our actions, our apathy, our attitudes, our unclean lips and unclean lives. God touches us, renews us, with warm and gracious words : « Be not afraid. I forgive you. I love you. Now take this love out to the world. » As we journey through the History of Salvation and the History of the Church, we not only notice that God calls on imperfect people, on sinners to serve Him and His People, but it is interesting to focus on how these people respond to God and how the Lord transforms them into his servants, into missionary disciples, into saints.

Let's take another look at the three characters of today's Biblical readings. Isaiah is definitely overwhelmed to find himself in God's presence. But he doesn't focus on his weakness. He listens to God's word : « *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us ?" And I said, "Here I am ; send me !"* » Oh how this resembles what your new bishop must be experiencing as he responds to God's call to serve in this Diocese. « *Not me Lord. I am unworthy. Call on someone else. I am a sinner.* » And yet, just as the prophet Isaiah, what is important is the bottom line : « *Here I am, send me !* » Saul's story, who became the great Saint Paul is similar. He was a zealous and pious Jew, filled with great knowledge, but lacking the light that gives a positive direction to one's life. His encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus changed everything. His life is transformed and he himself admits years later as he writes to the Corinthians : « *For I am the least of the Apostles, unfit to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.* »

Dear Bishop-elect Héctor, do you feel unfit to become a successor of the Apostles ? If you do, you are like Saint Paul. You too, by the grace of God are what you are. In fact, you chose as your Episcopal Motto a very phrase from Saint Paul : « *My grace is sufficient for you.* » When I asked you the reason for this choice you answered : « *I chose this Episcopal Motto because it recalls how God has abundantly given me His unconditional help throughout the years. As a Christian and as*

a priest, I have experienced the truth of these words in every moment of my life, especially in the most difficult times. As I start this new chapter in my life, responding to God's call to make me a shepherd for His people, I trust that His merciful love will be the source of grace needed to proclaim the Good News to all.»

And finally let's take a look at Peter, or rather at Simon, as he is called before Jesus entrusts him with a new mission. He is a humble fisherman and lives on the shores of Lake Galilee. After a long night fishing without success, while he was cleaning his nets, Jesus spoke to Simon : « *Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.* » Of course, Simon replied. He has a strong character and wasn't too keen about the idea that the son of a carpenter was telling him, the professional fisherman, how to do his job, but what is amazing is his reply : « *Master, we have worked hard all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.* » If you say so... I will do it! And it was a miraculous catch ! Of course, this startled Simon Peter, to the point that he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, « *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man !* » Then Jesus said to Simon : « *Do not be afraid ; from now on you will be catching people.* » In other words, from now on you will be able to go out into the deep and save people from the waters of death and sin, you will become a fisherman who constantly brings people to meet the Lord of love and mercy.

A bishop is evidently a shepherd. That is why at his episcopal ordination he receives a pastoral staff, reminding him that he must take care of God's people and bring them to encounter and follow Jesus Christ, to the One who gives us the waters of abundant life. But we could also give you a fisherman's net, reminding you of the mission you receive today to go out into the deep of humanity, to deep waters where there is not enough light and hope so as to bring our brothers and sisters home to Christ, to truth and love, to eternal life. I hear there is great fishing here in the Yukon Territory. Lake Trout, Arctic Grayling, Salmon and Northern Pike, to name a few of the well-known species. But your specialty will be in casting your nets to reach out to those men and women who are searching for inner peace and hope, for the loving presence of a pastor filled with mercy.

Bishop Héctor, Pope Francis has entrusted you with a new Bride, a portion of the People of God, the Diocese of Whitehorse. That is symbolized by the ring that will be put on your finger in a few moments. And the Holy Father, speaking to a group of newly ordained bishops reminded them :

« When, at the moment of your consecration, the name of your Church was pronounced, the faces of those God was giving you reverberated. These People need your patience to care for them, to make them grow. I know well the extent to which our time has been rendered barren. It is necessary, then, to imitate Moses' patience in order to guide your people, without fear of dying in exile, but expending all your energy to the very end, not for you but to let those you are leading enter into God. Nothing is more important than introducing people to God! I especially entrust to you the young people and the elderly. The former

because they are our wings, and the latter because they are our roots. Wings and roots without which we would not know what we are nor where we need to go¹. »

And Pope Francis continues :

« I see in you sentinels, capable of awakening your Churches, rising before dawn or in the middle of the night in order to rekindle faith, hope, charity, without allowing yourselves to be lulled or to conform to the nostalgic lament of a fruitful but now superseded past. Continue to dig into your sources, with the courage to remove the scales that have covered the beauty and the vigour of your pilgrim and missionary ancestors who planted the Church and created civilization.

I see in you men capable of cultivating and developing God's field, in which the young sowers await hands willing to water it daily in the expectation of an abundant harvest.

Lastly I see in you Pastors capable of reconstructing unity, of weaving networks, of mending, of overcoming fragmentation. May you dialogue respectfully with the great traditions in which you are immersed, without fear of becoming lost and without the need to defend your borders, because the Church's identity is defined by the love of Christ who knows no borders. While jealously safeguarding the passion for truth, do not expend energy on opposing and confronting, but on building and loving.

Thus, sentinels, men capable of tending God's field, shepherds who walk before, among and behind the flock...². »

Dear Bishop Héctor Felipe Vila, contemplate the One who has called you and who has brought you here to shepherd this portion of the People of God. He is a faithful God who will sustain you every day as you serve the people of this Diocese of Whitehorse. You can count on Him as you share this mission with the priests, with the consecrated men and women and with the faithful of this Community. We are happy to be here with you today on this very special day in your life and you can also count on our prayers and support. For it is together that we best serve the Lord. It is united in faith that we find the courage to cast out into the deep waters of today's world to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. You have generously offered your life to God in affirming : *« Here I am, Lord. Send me ! »* You will not walk alone. We, your brother bishops, will be there to support you and I am sure that this Community will also support you. We are not only here today to pray and celebrate with you. We offer you our friendship and respect, our communion in the mission of evangelization. With the psalmist and with you we say : *« The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever ».*

¹ Pope Francis, *Address to bishops appointed over the past year*, Clementine Hall, Vatican, September 18, 2014.

² Ibid.