

Homily for Mass for the Conferral of the Pallium
Most Rev. Francis Leo
Metropolitan Archbishop of Toronto
29 September 2023
St. Michael's Cathedral Basilica

Praised be Jesus Christ!

My dear Brothers and Sisters,

Just over 8 months or so, on the feast of the virgin and martyr St. Agnes, 2 little lambs were carried in a basket to Pope Francis for his blessing. And then they underwent a massive haircut - a crewcut to be exact. Their white wool was subsequently used by a group of nuns to knit this pallium which was later given to me and 31 other Archbishops in Rome on the feast of Sts Peter and Paul, last 29th June. That Eucharistic celebration was a very moving and meaningful experience of faith and communion with the Apostolic See. A small delegation from the archdiocese participated and I am grateful for that opportunity.

Back in Toronto, a little over 6 months since we celebrated the Mass of Installation when my ministry among you as Chief Shepherd began and this evening we find ourselves once again in our wonderful Cathedral Basilica taking part in yet another beautiful liturgical gathering. We welcome the Bishops who have come to join us in fellowship and worship, especially those of the 4 suffragan dioceses that make up the Ecclesiastical Province of Toronto: Hamilton, London, Thunder Bay and St. Catharines. Likewise, we welcome the many other bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, consecrated men and women, and the laity from our parishes, movements and associations, and representatives from health, educational and social services institutions and ministries – all of you with whom I am truly honoured to serve this great archdiocese of Toronto. His Eminence Cardinal Thomas Collins unfortunately could not make it and has sent his regrets. The Holy Father, as you may know, has called a Consistory, a meeting in Rome at the occasion of the creation of new Cardinals and our very own Cardinal Collins is there participating in the event as well.

But allow me to highlight especially 2 presences, if I may:

The first is that of Pope Francis' personal Representative in Canada, the **Apostolic Nuncio** Most Rev. Ivan Jurkovič who led us in prayer at the beginning of this celebration. Thank you, Your Excellency, for your gracious presence among us and your signature kindness, your generous service to the Church in Canada and for being such a

supportive brother and visible bond linking us with the Holy Father and the Universal Church.

The other presence is that of the **Youth**. I am delighted that quite a number of young people of our communities are here this evening, many of whom have also attended WYD in Portugal last month. My dear Young People, know that you are loved and supported as you walk along the path of faith, a journey on which we walk side by side – we are here with you along the way. You are very important, you are cherished members of the family, you are part of our sacred household, you are blessed. We lift you up in prayer and recognize in you God's chosen ones and a real gift given to us all to help us better understand the vibrancy, beauty, freshness and holiness of the Church herself, our mother. As you make your way through the many decisions and choices in your life, your calling and your future, the many opportunities that lie before you, do not be afraid to take risks for the Lord, do not fear the world and society – stay close to Jesus – he will guide you through his Holy Spirit and the prayers of his Mother Mary; share your gifts with us, be engaged in the work of evangelization to fully experience the Lord's manifold blessings in this world; our contemporary culture needs to see your smile, your energy and the youthfulness of your faith. You are not alone; remember that your future is marked by the Lord's abundant and choicest blessings – so be confident and generous.

Now back to the sheep!

Wearing this woolen band around my neck and over the chasuble reminds me, and indeed all of us, of a few essential takeaways:

1. Given to me by the Successor of St. Peter, this liturgical garment speaks to the vital importance of living in communion with the Roman Pontiff, the Apostolic See, brother bishops and to be an agent, an instrument of communion in the Church, the Body of Christ. Once knitted and before being distributed to the newly-appointed metropolitan archbishops, the pallium was first placed upon the tomb of St. Peter at the Vatican the evening before the June celebration – and it stayed there all night till the morning of the celebration. At the end of the Eucharist we all made our way down to the tomb and prayed for the intercession of that outstanding disciple, apostle and martyr. A profound experience of the Catholic and Apostolic faith.

2. Jesus Christ is our first and best Good Shepherd, better yet, as St. Peter puts it in his letter (1 Pt 2:25): he is the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. Imagine that. This is a beautiful way of understanding the Lord's care for us – he shepherds us and oversees our hearts, he looks after our wellbeing and guides our steps – he lets us rest in green

pastures; he leads us to quiet waters; he restores our soul, anoints our head with oil and our cup overflows (cf. Psalm 22).

3. We recall how all of us – including those in the ordained ministry – are first of all members of the flock of Christ: sheep, lambs in the sheepfold. This is who we are even before we are called to assume a vocation of shepherd, overseer, servant leader. Similar to a healer who is at the same time wounded, so we too are shepherds who at the same time are sheep. Not only is Jesus the Good Shepherd who leads us, nourishes, provides for, protects, guides, knows us, loves us and calls us, he himself is the blessed Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, your personal sins and mine. The liturgy refers to him as the *Agnus redemit ovem* – the Lamb who redeems, who buys back, the flock. We are washed clean by the Precious Blood of the Lamb of sacrifice, and, though our sins may be as scarlet and crimson, they will become white as wool, so says the Lord through the prophet Isaiah (cf. 1:18).

4. Wearing part of a sheep on my shoulders reminds me that I need to bear and make my own the smell of the sheep, as Pope Francis loves to say. That smell is not a musky cologne you buy at the local mall, but a powerful statement of our life for and with the People of God, a life of closeness, of service and togetherness along the same path to Heaven. This blessed cloth reminds me also that I need to be a good shepherd to the people and specifically to seek out the lost sheep, but also the ignored, the forgotten and the overlooked, and to put them on my shoulders and bring them back to safety. It is a symbol, and for humans in general and Catholics in particular, symbols are very important, like that of the Crucifix, the Sacred Heart, statues of Our Lady, sacramentals and others; having them before our eyes, visible even and especially in our Catholic institutions of health, education and social services – these symbols are sacred and life-giving, they inspire us and remind us who we are in Christ, what our calling is and they bring meaning to life's challenges. The six crosses around it underline the sacrificial nature of the sacred ministry and the selflessness and the suffering this calling inevitably entails and requires. And I wear this symbol with an undying conviction that I myself need to live my life in such a way that the flock entrusted to my pastoral care may live – live and experience profoundly the abundant life of Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 10:10), live with integrity and holiness, live in justice and peace, in mercy and compassion, in truth, beauty and goodness.

5. As the little lambs were chosen for a reason and goal – sharing their wool for a greater purpose – so too each of us, bishops and priests, deacons and seminarians, vowed consecrated and laity, are called to give our lives to Jesus, in the Church, for the Kingdom, for God's glory and the eternal salvation of humanity. Let's quietly ask

ourselves the question: In my life, what is that wool that Jesus is inviting me to give up so that others might experience His love and grace through the gift of myself, my sacrifice?

I conclude now with a story, a true one. The year was 1848, the day was 29 September – exactly 175 years ago, today, to the day, here in this blessed Cathedral. Toronto was without a Bishop; its chief shepherd Michael Power had passed away in October 1847. He had laid the corner stone for the Cathedral on 8 May 1845. But it wasn't until the fall of 1850 that a new shepherd, Bishop Armand-François-Marie de Charbonnel, a French Sulpician, would arrive. And so, what was decided, by divine Providence no doubt, was to ask the Bishop of Montreal, Monseigneur Ignace Bourget, to come to Toronto to consecrate the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel. This evening we have the honour of celebrating this momentous anniversary and significant milestone with the participation of the successor to Bishop Bourget, Archbishop Christian Lépine. *Merci cher confère pour votre présence, votre appui, votre témoignage et votre amitié dans le Seigneur; nos deux diocèses sont unis de façon mystérieuse et providentielle dans le cœur de Dieu et en nos cœurs.*

And so, this Cathedral was consecrated 175 years ago, the physical building, naturally, the stones and walls, and that's a wonderful event to commemorate, of course. However, we must never forget that we ourselves are the living stones (cf. 1 Peter 2:5), not the dead stones, that make up the Church of Christ, the spiritual edifice, and we are those consecrated to the Lord. This is our identity and our calling and we are invited to share it with others. Let us go forth and make disciples for the Lord.

Praised be Jesus Christ!