

**Episcopal Ordination of Fr. Paul Mason in**  
**St. George's Cathedral, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016**

My dear brothers and sisters,

We celebrate this ordination Mass on the very beautiful Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Just before this meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, St. Luke in his gospel tells us the story of the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that God wants her to be the mother of his Son and that this will come about through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Yet despite the incredible call she receives, Mary gives her wholehearted “yes” to God’s request. Gabriel also tells her that her cousin Elizabeth has also conceived a son despite her barrenness, “because nothing is impossible to God.” Mary then sets out to meet Elizabeth and these two women greet each other to share the joy and mystery of their pregnancies brought about by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit” praises God, acknowledging that Mary has been blessed by God and says to her, “Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb... Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.” And Mary then responds with her great hymn of praise, the Magnificat, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my saviour... for the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.”

This is the work of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to do as God asks, and both Mary and Elizabeth in their different circumstances, opened their hearts to the power of God. They entrusted themselves to the love and mercy of God, firmly putting their trust and faith in his promises. And the joy of these two women is to be found precisely in that firm faith and trust in God. Mary received her vocation directly through the message of an angel; Elizabeth received hers through her husband, Zechariah who himself had been visited by an angel, and both gave their wholehearted “yes” to God’s call.

Paul, God’s call to you to be ordained a bishop, came to you not through an angelic visitation but through the Church, specifically from Pope Francis, following his consultation with the Congregation of Bishops in Rome. And I suspect your first thoughts on receiving that call, may well have been, “But why me? Who am I to be given this great responsibility of shepherding the flock of Christ? I’m not perfect; there are other priests who are holier and much better equipped than me to fulfil this role!” But be of good heart! The words of St. Bede the Venerable, commenting on the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, remind us that Mary, “attributes nothing to her own merits but speaks of all her greatness as the gift of the one who is power and greatness itself, the one who is constantly making his poor weak followers into characters of great strength.” And never forget what Jesus said to his Apostles at the Last Supper, “You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

Being ordained a bishop, is a call to be shepherd of the flock entrusted to your care; a call to serve the People of God, with humility, mercy and compassion. It isn’t about becoming a celebrity, or being honoured or given status in the eyes of others. The implications of that call are spelled out well in St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, as we heard in the second reading. He is, of course speaking to all the members of the Christian community in Rome, all the baptised. But all the more so do his words apply to the shepherds, the leaders of Christian communities, when he exhorts them “to love each other as brothers should, and have a profound respect for each other. Work for the Lord with untiring effort and with great earnestness of spirit... Don’t give up if trials come; and keep on praying. If any of the saints are in need you must share with them; and you

should make hospitality your special care. Bless those who persecute you... rejoice with those who rejoice and be sad with those in sorrow. Treat everyone with equal kindness; never be condescending but make real friends with the poor." And St. Peter in his First Letter, addresses bishops in particular when he writes, "Be the shepherd of the flock of God that is entrusted to you; watch over it, not simply as a duty but gladly, because God wants it... Never be a dictator over any group put in your charge, but be an example that the whole flock can follow."

Those sentiments are very dear to Pope Francis and in speaking to bishops round the world he places great importance on us being men of prayer especially. Each day we need to have that personal encounter with the risen Christ in our prayer, because as the Holy Father said to the bishops of the USA, "The heart of our identity is to be sought in constant prayer, in preaching and in shepherding the flock." It's in that daily encounter with our Lord and Master that we hear his call deep in our hearts every day. As we begin each day we need to ask his help and guidance. "Lord, open my ears that I may hear. Open my eyes that I may see. Open my heart and rekindle within it today the fire of your love." Such a daily encounter empowers us to be more aware of what God wants us to do, rather than us just going off and doing what we might want to do.

So, Paul, thank you so much for saying "yes" to the call God has given you through the Church, and be assured our prayers are with you especially as, in a few minutes, you will make your solemn promise before the people to fulfil the duties and responsibilities of episcopal office.