



Homily of Bishop Felipe J. Estévez
Installation as the Tenth Bishop of St. Augustine
St. Joseph Catholic Church, Jacksonville, Florida
June 2, 2011

The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole world. Yes, the season of jubilation in which we celebrate the salvific death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ still goes on, and the magnificent joy of Easter is expressed by the flourishing of the sacraments, by flowers and resounding alleluias. The Spanish pioneers arriving to our own shores, precisely at Easter time, named this new land “Florida” to commemorate the season, *la feliz Pascua Florida!* (Easter full of flowers)

These pioneers started anew in America, first of all, by honoring the cross. The first evangelization in North America began with the proclamation of Christ crucified in continuity with the teachings of St. Paul the Apostle: “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Cor. 1:18-25) Five-hundred years later, the “Great Cross” stands tall at the Mission Nombre de Dios in St. Augustine. Today, let us lift high the cross because its saving power is more than ever our hope. *O Crux spes nostra!*

Today we participate in the mystery of the Church, which is always in dynamic development. It is, “a building that has the apostles and the prophets for its foundations” and our Lord Jesus Christ as its living cornerstone. (Eph. 2, 19) This universal Church of the Risen Lord is made present in the Church of St. Augustine in North Florida. Our local Church celebrates today an apostolic succession in true historical continuity. One bishop passed on his mission to another for the proclamation of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

As Blessed John Henry Newman would say, “I am a link in a chain.” I am honored to be linked to Bishop Agustin Verot, this holy, industrious and courageous missionary bishop who did so much in just six years of episcopal ministry. His legacy is wonderfully kept today by our Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Augustine. They too are great pioneers of religious life in Florida. They came to teach and catechize the newly freed slaves after the Civil War and today continue to respond to the needs of the community. I also am honored to be linked to Archbishop Joseph Hurley, the great visionary builder of the contemporary Church of Florida.

The history of the Mother Diocese of Florida is especially rich. On December 5, 1520, Pope Leo X, erected the Diocese of Santiago de la Florida, making it the Primatial See of North America.

But the first bishop, Juan Suárez, was not able to be installed. Finally, on September 8, 1565, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés took possession of Florida. Afterwards, Father Francisco López de Mendoza, celebrated the historical “First Mass of Thanksgiving” in these territories. It was here, the Gospel message entered North America through the gate of Florida.

This was followed by great and heroic evangelization efforts by the Jesuits, and even more by the Franciscans. Marked by the blood of martyrs they spread the faith of Jesus Christ, from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean, and from the Florida Keys north to Virginia. They worked hard for two centuries establishing 120 missions with 900 missionaries.

The great historian, Dr. Michael Gannon wrote that the friars were the first to defend the human rights of the natives of the new world. The appointment of Bishop Dionisio Resino from Cuba in 1709, as auxiliary of Cuba for St. Augustine, was followed by Cuban bishops who had the same assignment for more than a century.

This complex task of evangelization found multiple obstacles: from fatal diseases that took the lives of thousands of natives, to harsh pressure from secular powers. Nonetheless, thanks to the friars’ patience and perseverance, 20-thousand natives embraced the faith in Florida. We remember them today because they are the first flock of this great diocese.

In this regard, I remember the Venerable Father Félix Varela; who like myself, was born in Cuba. He came to St. Augustine at an early age and spent most of his life ministering to the Church in the United States. During his visit to Cuba, His Holiness John Paul II honored Father Varela’s legacy as a champion of freedom in his native land, calling the Church and culture to embrace a vibrant, engaged faith that would save society from the threats of fanaticism, superstition, and ideology that threatened to lead many astray.

When Varela came to North America he found a new ministry in New York City where he served until he returned to St. Augustine – the city where he had lived as a child and teenager. He passed away in odor of sanctity, gazing from a distance at Cuba – his homeland.

Therefore, it is not unusual that a Hispanic-American comes to you today, to continue with new vigor the glorious work of evangelization in Florida.

In fact, His Holiness Benedict XVI calls us all to renew our enthusiasm for a new evangelization. This is a bold summons that challenges each of us. Let us proclaim anew the Gospel of the cross, making new disciples, expanding the faith community and its outreach to sinners and to the poor.

In his visit to our country in 2008, Benedict XVI said, “I have come to America to confirm you in the faith of the Apostles... I have come to implore from the Lord a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church in this country.”

As the new Bishop of St. Augustine, I pray we are graced with a new Pentecost for the Church in America. The Church of the Eucharist needs to be born again and again, worshipping the living triune God, the absolute priority of our lives.

As St. Augustine said so well, “O mystery of true faith! O sign of unity! O bond of love! He who wishes to live has the place to live, has the means to live. Let him approach, let him believe, let him be embodied, that he may be given life.” (Tractates on the Gospel of St. John 11-27)

True worship leads to true service. Like the one who loved us and gave himself for us, we are called to humbly serve our neighbor. We are to love each person as Christ, who shed his most precious blood for everyone without exception. I hope that the new evangelization will advance in this diocese, which today, I am called to care for, with your collaboration. I pray that we might be energized by the Eucharist and always seek to honor the Eucharistic Lord!

I also pray that we might be a force to bring about a more civil and just society, a society of love that manifests the harmony and peace of the Eucharistic kingdom in our midst.

In America we dream of a bright future. As Florida Catholics, we share in that dream and devote ourselves to promote human dignity, and to carry on the evangelization of this land, a task that started long ago with such vitality and heroism right here in North Florida.

I dedicate this new decade to the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, a Eucharistic woman. The Body and Blood of Christ rightly belong to her. This concreteness of the humanity of Christ is so graciously depicted for us in Our Lady of La Leche. The most Blessed Virgin Mary is the star of the new evangelization as well as the dawn of a true culture of life for all. As Benedict XVI said to us all here in America, “Let us ask the Virgin Mary to obtain a renewed Pentecost for the Church again today; a Pentecost that will spread in everyone the joy of living and witnessing the Gospel.” (Homily, Pentecost Sunday, 2008) Like the Beloved Disciple at the glorious cross, let us receive Mary into the home of our hearts.

St. Augustine, pray for us.