

Bishop-elect Stephen Parkes' Speech 7/8/20

Last Thursday morning, I woke up early and embarked on a 31-mile bike ride. Usually during the ride I take the opportunity to pray one of the mysteries of the Rosary. That morning, being it was Thursday, I prayed the luminous mysteries, but for some reason was inspired and I didn't know why, to pray the joyful mysteries as well.

Upon arriving back home at the rectory, while preparing to make breakfast, I received a very unexpected phone call from Archbishop Christophe Pierre (apostolic nuncio to United States) informing me that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, has appointed me as the 15th Bishop of the Diocese of Savannah. Needless to say, I was very surprised and, as you can imagine, my mind went blank for a few moments. I was very glad that I had prayed those extra mysteries earlier on the bike ride. I am humbled by the confidence that the Holy Father has placed in me to be the next shepherd of the beautiful Diocese of Savannah.

As we all know, our diocese has an incredibly rich and longstanding history. When it was founded in 1850, it included the state of Georgia and large part of Florida, including the area of Central Florida that I've called home for the past 37 years. My family has roots here, as my grandparents relocated to the Augusta area in the late 1940s and my father spent part of his childhood there. Bishop Emeritus Boland and I have something very unique and special in common in that we both have older brothers with whom we have shared not only the bonds of family, but also of the fraternity of the priesthood.

Over the past few years, I've had the pleasure of getting to know my predecessor Archbishop Hartmayer while attending the board of trustees meetings at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary. I know that you are appreciative of his fine leadership these past years and remember him in prayer as he assumes his new responsibilities as the Archbishop of Atlanta.

In my very brief time since my arrival here, you have made me feel very much at home. I look forward to getting to know you and to ministering with you, the priests, deacons, religious, seminarians, and the holy people- the faithful people of God. I am grateful for decades. The seeds of our Catholic faith that have been planted in the hearts of God's people here in the 90 counties of the Diocese of Savannah. Together may we have the grace and vision to continue to tend and nurture these seeds of faith and to plant new ones as missionary disciples for years to come.

In my past 22 years of priesthood in the Diocese of Orlando, I have realized my deep love for parish ministry and have been blessed in my assignments in the parish communities of Annunciation and Most Precious Blood and in campus ministry at the University of Central Florida. I am grateful to all who I have looked up to as mentors in the Diocese of Orlando, but also to the people who I have served. They've taught me not only about ministry, but I have learned from them the inexhaustible nature and presence of God's love, of His goodness and of His mercy.

My parents were dedicated to our Catholic faith and provided a beautiful example of family life to their sons. I am blessed with a special bond of family and priestly fraternity with my brother, Bishop Gregory Parkes of the Diocese of St. Petersburg. As his younger brother, I always looked up to him, believe it or

not, in physical stature as he is four inches taller than I am, but also I appreciate his advice, his guidance and his love. Along with our sister-in-law and niece, we are a small family but blessed to be a close family. I also have relatives in North Carolina and I look forward to being within just a few hours driving distance of them.

It is interesting today that I also want to acknowledge those who join us on the livestream. My friends, we are living in extraordinary times as we face a pandemic and recent social unrest. For all of us, now more than every we need hope and healing. We need recognition of God's image that is in the life of every human person. Over the past few months of challenge and unprecedented circumstances I've often reflected upon the words of Saint Paul from Romans Chapter 12 Verse 12, "Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer." Today I ask you to please pray for me that I can be the shepherd God that has called me to be and that you need and deserve. I also make my commitment to pray for you, your loved ones and your intentions. We may not see each other each day, but, my friends, may we meet each day in our prayers. Amen.

Questions:

Do you play basketball? - In a very amateur way, just because you're tall doesn't mean you're good at basketball (laughs). I think God had other plans for the Parkes brothers.

What does this mean to you, being named bishop here? - It's overwhelming. I just found out about this a few days ago, so you can only imagine what's been on my mind these past few days... I've really brought it to God, brought it to some wonderful moments of prayer, some scary moments too. But I ultimately realize that God is always in charge... It's a very new role. It's a new place to live, many new people to get to know, but one thing is always the same because He was the same yesterday, today and forever and that is Jesus Christ. And our faith in Christ, I know brings us through whatever it is we may face and whatever God asks of us.

What do you look forward to in new role? - I look forward to driving to meet the faithful here and to getting to know people and also the diversity of the people here that God has planted, God has placed here and celebrating with them - passing on the gift of faith. You know, we as Catholics we have Good News to share. We have Good News to share. It was brought to us in the beginning was the Good News. The Good News is the presence of Christ. The Good News is the Lord being born into our world over 2,000 years ago and walking this earth. And I think to be able to help bring that as the bishop of this diocese, that to me is something very exciting, very humbling, but also something I think the Lord will help me with as well.

Expecting any challenges or differences? - In my last years, as I mentioned I spent 22 years in Diocese of Orlando, I learned what it is to be a parish priest. My heart is as a parish priest. I think it is something that I can bring to this particular office, this particular role. I always try my best and give that to God at the end of the day. I've learned about some of the workings of diocese through various board and committees that I've served on at the invitation of the diocese. I obviously need to learn more about how things operate here and the manner in which we go about building the Kingdom of God and spreading His Word. On daily basis, I'm not sure exactly what that involves. I arrived here about 15 minutes ago I think, haven't been to the office yet. I don't plan on spending a lot of time in that office. I

want to be with people and meet people... How are we going to go forward? How do we look to the past with gratitude? How do we live in the present with a beautiful sense of thankfulness and awe of God and look to the future with it?

What's something fun or unexpected about you? – I mentioned that I loved going out on a bike. I don't do 30 miles every day, I assure you. I love the outdoors. I love nature... just love being outdoors, the fresh air, sunshine, clouds, humidity it's all fine with me. It's fine because it's all part of God's creation.

About Ordination September 23 - Thank you very much for your understanding, for your welcome today and for receiving me. I'm very excited to be here. I look forward to September 23. It is the memorial of St. Pio of Pietrelcina, also known as St. Padre Pio. That's the day I will be Ordained a bishop and installed here in the Diocese of Savannah. I look forward to that day and celebrating with you. I don't know what that's going to look like at this point. I don't think any of us do. I've kind of learned that there's always survival of the fittest, but I think in these days it's survival of the adaptable. So, I think as we look forward to September 23 and my permanent home here, I really be looking forward to getting to know you and the diocese and getting out in the fresh air of beautiful South Georgia. Thank you for your warmth and your kindness as well.

Prayer from Bishop-elect Parkes:

God, our Heavenly Father along with the intercession of St. John the Baptist, the patron of the Diocese of Savannah, we ask you, Lord, for Your goodness, Your grace to come upon the people here present. Those who are joining us today. Those who are with us, those who are not. We ask Lord that You will help me in this new role, in my new life as the Bishop of Savannah. Thanksgiving today for Your goodness for me personally always, for my family, for those who helped to mentor and helped me along the way. For Your goodness to the people here. We especially today reach out to those in need. Those who are reaching out for You. We know what You always hear the cry of the poor, of the oppressed. We pray always for greater sense of equality, a greater sense of understanding, compassion and respect for the beautiful and incredible dignity of human life that you have given to us. May you give us hope for the future, thanks for the past, and strength in the present.