

Mass for Pope Francis
Thursday, March 21, 2013
Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel, Loretto

I am grateful to Msgr. Swope and the staff of St. Michael the Archangel Parish for arranging this Mass in thanksgiving to God for our new Holy Father, Pope Francis. This place was chosen as the site of our celebration for good reason.

People in this area have always appreciated the importance of this church, because of its historic significance. The final resting place of the pioneer priest of this area, Servant of God Demetrius Gallitzin is directly in front of the main entrance.

The word basilica comes from a Greek word meaning royal or having a higher status. Since only the Pope can declare that a church building should have this special status, a basilica is often referred to as the Pope's church. St. Michael the Archangel was named a basilica in 1996 by Blessed John Paul II.

Based on tradition, there are some symbols permanently displayed that identify this place as a basilica. A basilica is often referred to as a Pope's church, so we have a chair which can only be used by the Pope, and we have the *ombrellino*, a kind of red and gold umbrella which would be used in a procession to welcome the Pope to this place.

The crossed keys, which symbolize the office of Pope, as well as the *ombrellino* are allowed to be used in the coat of arms of this historic Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel.

Bishop Joseph Adamec, Bishop-emeritus of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown was instrumental in petitioning Pope John Paul II to name this church as a basilica. I am grateful to Bishop Joseph for being here this evening.

There are more than 1400 basilicas in the world, so it might take our new Holy Father Pope Francis awhile to visit all of his papal churches. Would anyone care to make a motion that we formally invite Pope Francis to visit us here at the Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel?

Who knows, from what we have seen in less than two weeks since his election, Pope Francis has surprised everyone with his unusual travel. He returned to the hotel after the election to retrieve his luggage and pay the bill; he has decided to walk sometimes instead of riding in a limousine, and he has stepped outside of the “Pope-mobile” to greet the people in the square in front of St. Peter Basilica in Rome.

I was not able to watch the installation Mass for Pope Francis earlier this week on the Feast of St. Joseph. But I read that before the Mass there were three important moments of the ceremony inaugurating the new Pope’s Petrine ministry.

The first was the imposition of the *pallium* made from lamb's wool. One of the Cardinals placed the *pallium* on the Holy Father's shoulders. This band of cloth is a traditional symbol of jurisdiction or ecclesiastical authority.

It also represents a kind of service that Jesus Christ teaches us in the Gospel. The pallium that is placed on the Pope’s shoulders also represents the lost, sick, or weak sheep which the shepherd places on his shoulders and carries to the waters of life. We are reminded in this evening’s Responsorial Psalm of this type of pastoral service that follows the example of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

So many people have observed that Pope Francis has already given examples of this form of pastoral service in the manner in which he reaches out to ordinary people wherever he is seen. He has already spoken about the significance for all of us to follow the example of the Good Shepherd.

During his homily at the Mass of Inauguration on Tuesday, Pope Francis spoke of the need for all of us to treat those who are lost, or poor, or weak with great tenderness and great care.

So already our new Holy Father has captured our attention and imagination by showing and teaching us about all of the grace and favor of God that Isaiah the Prophet preached in this evening’s first reading:

- bringing good news to the afflicted
- binding up the wounds of the brokenhearted
- proclaiming liberty to captives and
- releasing prisoners

- comforting all who mourn
- placing a diadem and the oil of gladness on those who mourn and
- giving everyone a glorious mantle instead of a faint spirit.

The second special moment that occurred just before the Inauguration Mass of Pope Francis occurred when the Dean of the College of Cardinals presented the Fisherman's Ring to our Holy Father.

This ring bears the image of Peter holding the keys. This is a symbol of his office as a bishop and the head of the order of bishops.

But it is not a symbol of power. As Pope Francis stated in his homily on Tuesday, he is reminded of the need for all of us, including the Pope, to treat other persons with tenderness, with compassion.

This is the point that our Lord Jesus Christ is speaking about in this evening's Gospel reading. Jesus tells us that he does not think of us as slaves.

Instead, Jesus considers us his friends if we keep God's commandments. The expectation is that we will not treat others as slaves, but as friends, as brothers and sisters who deserve our expressions of tenderness and compassion.

Jesus is speaking about the commandment to love one another as God loves us. How often we are tempted to view the effort that is necessary to keep God's commandments as a burden.

Yet, Jesus explains that he has told us about keeping God's commandment of love so that his joy may be in you and me and that our joy may be complete.

It seems that in just a few days, Pope Francis has shown us how to live a God-centered life that is not a burden. It is a source of true joy and happiness.

How many people have said that one look at our Holy Father's face shows us that he is a person of joy and tenderness and that he is eager to share those blessings with us!

There was a third moment of tradition that happened just before the start of the Papal Mass on Tuesday in Rome. Six cardinals made a symbolic act of obedience on behalf of all the other cardinals. It is an act of respect to the leader of the Church.

But we need to remember that such an act of obedience is also an act of love and humility. That's what Jesus is speaking about in the Gospel when he tells us that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Did you notice the expression of such love and humility shown by Pope Francis when he was first introduced soon after his election? In front of thousands of people in St. Peter's square and in front of the entire world as we watched at home, Pope Francis asked us to bless him.

And as soon as he asked for our prayer of blessing, he bowed, not just his head; but he bowed in a profound way and remained silent for a couple of moments.

Did you notice how quiet the crowd in Rome became in an instant? As I watched, I saw how they followed the example of Pope Francis as they bowed their heads in silent prayer.

Again, not with words as much as with example, our new Holy Father was teaching us about signs of reverence and respect for others; of signs of obedience and humility.

And so we gather here at the Altar of our Lord in this Holy Eucharist to bow with reverence and respect and in obedience and humility before our Lord Jesus Christ who tells us in the Gospel that we must go and do the same.

The reaction of so many Catholics and non-Catholics around the world is that in his joyful, simple and humble way, Pope Francis has quickly begun to teach us what really matters.

As Jesus says in the Gospel, he has appointed us to go and bear fruit that will remain. And with those words he encourages us that whatever we ask our Holy Father in the name of the Lord Jesus will be given to us.

In the end, what really matters is our vocation to love one another. We rejoice and we give thanks to God for our Holy Father Francis who has immediately begun a sign of joy and encouragement.

In this celebration of the Holy Eucharist and everyday, please respond to our Holy Father's request that we pray for and bless him so that he can carry out the responsibility of caring for us that God has entrusted to him.

In this celebration of the Holy Eucharist pray for an abundant outpouring of God's love upon all of us so that you and I can go out and love all people, especially those in most need of God's love. That is what really matters.

It's good for us to be here in the Pope's basilica to pray and give thanks.

May St. Michael the Archangel guard and protect our Church and our new Holy Father Pope Francis.