

Benedict XVI marks 60 years as a priest



*Pope Benedict XVI arrives for pallium Mass at St Peter's Basilica
(CNS photo/Paul Haring)*

Pope Benedict XVI has described the priesthood as a demanding and “awe-inspiring” ministry that brought him closer to God in his homily at a pallium Mass with archbishops from 25 countries.

The Pope’s unusually personal recollection came on the 60th anniversary of his priestly ordination in Bavaria in 1951 and the feast of Ss Peter and Paul, the patron saints of Rome.

During the three-hour-long Mass, he gave 41 archbishops the woollen pallium as a sign of their communion with the pope and their pastoral responsibility as shepherds. Among them were four prelates from the United States, including Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, as well as Archbishop George Stack of Cardiff.

The liturgy in St Peter’s Basilica began with a fanfare of trumpets. The Pope smiled as he processed toward an altar ringed with flowers, pausing to greet Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.

The Pope devoted most of his homily to his 60 years of priestly ministry, and twice he excused himself for perhaps speaking too long about his recollections. He said he felt he had to look back on “the things that have left their mark”.

” ‘I no longer call you servants, but friends.’ Sixty years on from the day of my priestly ordination, I hear once again deep within me these words of Jesus that were addressed to us new priests at the end of the ordination ceremony by the archbishop, Cardinal Faulhaber, in his slightly frail yet firm voice,” the pope said.

“I knew, at that moment, the Lord himself was speaking to me in a very personal way,” he said.

The Pope said he felt called into the circle of those God knows in a special way, to a friendship that implies responsibilities.

“He trusts me to proclaim his word, to explain it aright and to bring it to the people of today,” he said.

Pope Benedict said friendship in this sense is about conforming one’s will to God and being prepared to step outside oneself and toward others – moving “beyond the inertia of self-centredness”.

This calling of the priest to friendship with God is “so awe-inspiring that one can feel daunted as the decades go by amid so many experiences of one’s own frailty and his inexhaustible goodness,” he said.

The Pope placed the pallium, a stole made from lamb’s wool, around the shoulders of the archbishops as they knelt before him. In his sermon, the Pope said the pallium signified the “yoke of friendship with Christ”, the pastoral duty to be a shepherd and communion with the Pope.

“It means that we must be shepherds for unity and in unity, and that it is only in the unity represented by Peter that we truly lead people to Christ,” he said.

The pallium is presented every year to new archbishops or those who have been assigned to a new archdiocese. Four new archbishops – including Archbishop Guire Poulard of Port-au-Prince, Haiti – were unable to attend the ceremony and received their palliums at home.

In addition to Archbishop Gomez, those receiving the pallium included Archbishops Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, Gustavo Garcia-Siller of San Antonio, Peter Sartain of Seattle, and Gerald Lacroix of Quebec.

Afterward, at a reception for well-wishers, the US archbishops spoke about the deeper meaning of the Mass. Archbishop Sartain, who came to Rome with nearly 500 pilgrims, said the pallium liturgy was “a wonderful expression of our unity together – first of all with the Holy Father, and through the Holy Father with the apostolic mission of preaching the Gospel everywhere in the world”.

Archbishop Coakley, noting that the pallium is made of wool, said it symbolised a pastoral challenge.

“It’s a sign of the Good Shepherd, being charged with carrying and caring for the sheep, as Christ the Good Shepherd would carry the lost and forsaken sheep to lead them back to the fold,” he said. “The Lord entrusted care of the flock to Peter – and Peter, today in this ceremony, in a very visible and symbolic way, entrusts to each of us some share of that burden.”

Archbishop Garcia-Siller said the Pope's words rightly underlined the joyful task of building unity in the Church, adding: "I hope I will be an instrument of the unity that Jesus wanted." He said that when the Pope laid the pallium on his shoulders, he told the Pope of this desire for unity.

"The Pope responded, 'San Antonio, Texas, yes!' Few words, but very meaningful," he said.

Archbishop Gomez, in Rome with about 400 pilgrims, said he's been sharing the excitement of the events with people back home on a Facebook page.

"I think a lot of people have been following it, and it's been a wonderful experience for me, using the modern means of communication to be in touch with the people of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles," he said.

Among the US pilgrims who travelled to Rome were Edward and Virginia Espinoza. They came for Archbishop Garcia-Siller, whom they met when he was a priest in Oxnard, Calif. They described him as a people person and a great speaker, whose homilies are "second to none".

"He treats everyone as the most important person in the world," Virginia Espinoza said before the start of the Mass in St Peter's.

Speaking at his noon blessing after the Mass, Pope Benedict thanked Catholics around the world for the prayers they offered on the occasion of his 60th anniversary as a priest. At the Vatican's request, Church communities around the world joined in 60 hours of Eucharistic adoration to mark the anniversary.

By John Thavis - Catholic Herald