

# Homily of Bishop Michael William Fisher

## *15th Bishop of the Diocese of Buffalo*

January 15, 2021  
St. Joseph Cathedral  
Buffalo, New York

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Your Eminence Cardinal Dolan, Bishop Scharfenberger, our Apostolic Administrator; my predecessor - Bishop Malone; Bishop William Byrne - who was my brother priest in the Archdiocese of Washington; my brother bishops, my fellow priests; my family members, and so many dear friends who are unable to be here with us, but are joining us via our live-streamed broadcast - my sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, one and all - how good it is to be here among you!

His Eminence Cardinal Wilton Gregory had planned to be with us as well, in addition to the Apostolic Nuncio - Archbishop Christophe Pierre - and several other special guests. The precautions, however, necessitated by our ongoing Covid threat have made their attendance not practical. I'm certainly grateful for their wonderful expressions of fraternal support and prayer.

My friends - I offer praise to God, Lord and Shepherd of us all, and my immense gratitude to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, for the gift to now serve you as your pastor and shepherd, your brother in the Faith that unites us, and as your devoted servant. Archbishop Pierre, if you are watching, I humbly ask that you convey my heartfelt gratitude to His Holiness for his confidence in me.

I now join the good and faithful people of the Diocese of Buffalo on the journey you've begun toward renewal, toward healing and in what must be our relentless work to make possible a new, more promising era for this Family of Faith. As now an official Buffalonian - I join your resounding chorus - "GO BILLS!"

Gathered as we are in a spirit of celebration and joy, we must at the same time hold in our hearts those who have lost so much and continue to endure so much

hardship as a result of the pandemic that together we continue to confront. As Auxiliary Bishop of Washington, I presided over the Mass of Christian Burial for four of my brother priests during this past year. It was a source of profound sadness that their lives of ministry and service ended so abruptly because of this virus. We must be mindful of the many lives that have been lost and affected, and offer up in prayer the aching sorrow experienced by husbands and wives, sons and daughters, grandchildren - friends and loved ones. Though hope has at last come to us in the form of a vaccine, we must accept that the threat has not passed and that we must do all that we can to protect the health and safety of others in the spirit of true Christian love and care.

It's with the greatest humility that I accept this call to now serve you as your fifteenth bishop, and which I view as a continuation of the assent to Christian discipleship, first offered on my behalf at baptism some 62 years ago by my wonderful and devoted parents, Margo and Bill. Together with my adoring grandparents who were such a presence and positive influence in our lives, I bring their memory to this altar today in a very special way, with the unqualified admission that all which has brought me to this point and enabled me over these many years to hear the often subtle voice of God - and to say yes again and again to His promptings - was made possible by their tremendous love and remarkable example of Faith and faithfulness.

Each of us, in our own way and in so many moments throughout our lives are asked to decide - to choose - to say "yes" or "no" - to accept or reject. We are often confronted with what may seem to be equally valid and justifiable options. We are able to reason and arrive at very different paths that will take us in very different directions, leading to very different conclusions about

our life's course and purpose. It is also the case that what the mind may dictate as the safer, more prudent course, the heart knows better, and is more likely than not to be the truer compass.

*“Lord to whom shall we go?”*

Simon Peter offers both the essential question and the definitive answer for all of us who confront daunting circumstances and the prospect of uncertain outcomes. It is not that Simon Peter has exhausted all other options and, out of sheer resignation, arrives at the last available alternative.

Rather, this flawed yet faithful Disciple recognizes and affirms that there is really only one viable choice, one undeniable truth: *“You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”*

For Simon Peter and those other Disciples who discerned the same compelling truth that gave them the courage also to remain, Jesus is both the end and starting point of their journey. For us now, in this place and time, the question is also ours: *“Do you also wish to go away?”*

We know all too well that there are those among us who have turned back and away - and admittedly for what we must accept as valid, or at the very least, understandable reasons. Those of us who remain know and assert in the depths of our hearts that it is Jesus Christ who calls us, and in whom we ultimately trust and follow. It is Jesus Christ who has the words of eternal life - who makes sense of all that we confront in our lives and that often doesn't make sense. It is Jesus Christ who never disappoints, though we confront deep disappointment; It is Jesus Christ whose promises are true and abiding, even when we have been disillusioned and left to wonder how it is we might recapture the zeal and joy that led us to become followers in the first place.

Already, I have become so touched, so enthused, by the abundance of goodwill, determination and expressions of support and commitment to collaboration. I arrive at a moment when considerable work has already begun in paving the path toward renewal that Bishop Scharfenberger has begun as Apostolic Administrator. I join with all of you in offering Bishop Scharfenberger

my sincere thanks for his leadership and devotion this past year. Overseeing the many affairs of one diocese is all-consuming; overseeing the affairs of two is, well, nothing short of heroic!

Bishop Ed - as he prefers, sharing my own preference for familiarity and friendship - saw the same potential which I have also seen in these first weeks since my appointment. Though I have had to rely on technology in reaching-out and becoming acquainted with so many who have rolled-up their sleeves and become engaged in this work known as the “Road to Renewal,” I have been struck by the clear and common sentiment that regards the extraordinary potential of this Faith community here in Western New York as unquestionably greater than the challenges that have been a preoccupation. Women and men of varied backgrounds and with complementary competencies - lay, clergy, religious, young and old and so many in-between - are determined to continue the proud legacy that has distinguished the Catholic faith and all that it has - and continues to make make possible in the lives of so many and when the need is so great.

Just as St. Paul in his letter to the Romans recognized that the one body is necessarily comprised of many members - with *“gifts that differ according to the grace given to us”* - so too must we recognize and embrace the many gifts of others, harvesting the best ideas, regardless of who thought of them, utilizing the talents and capabilities we need and from wherever we find them, relying on one another, supporting and encouraging one another. Depending on each and every one who - no greater or less than another - is vital to this one Body made whole by Christ Himself.

It is this disposition, this inclination to rely on and support one another that will determine our future. It was really never the case that the work of evangelization belonged only to those ordained in Holy Orders or religious life, though admittedly, this was a perception that persisted for far too long. Our parishes are always the seed-bed of evangelization, where faith is nurtured at the earliest stages of life, where our most profound and defining moments are celebrated, mourned and interpreted in the light of the Gospel; where the many charisms that enrich our Family of Faith are allowed to flourish and contribute each in its own way, without competition or bias, but combined together with the talents and capabilities of others just as St. Paul asserts:

*“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”*

One of aspects that has so defined and distinguished your legacy here in the Diocese of Buffalo is the commitment to educating the young - instilling in their young minds and hearts a sense of purpose, conviction and personal responsibility that of course, is rooted in Christian discipleship. We have no more urgent priority than to continue this proud legacy of Catholic education, nurturing the potential of our youth; addressing their needs, guiding and supporting them as they sort out the often conflicting demands and influences of our present age. *“To whom shall THEY go?”* They seek understanding and to understand; they look to us in determining the choices they should make and the direction they should pursue. We need to be there for them; always to listen first and to provide them everything they need to feel safe, cared for, respected and cherished.

I have often considered those who devote their lives to educating our youth as true heroes who demonstrate what Jesus regarded as the greatest love: “To lay down one’s life” for another. And so, to all the educators and those who support and work in our schools and parish faith formation programs, you have my gratitude, my constant admiration, and my commitment to be your advocate and your partner in defining a new era of Catholic education here in the Diocese of Buffalo.

In this work of renewal that together must be our constant preoccupation, we must be ever mindful of those who have turned away - not because of any failing on their part - but because they have been deeply harmed by the sin and failing of those they trusted most. Those who have suffered abuse, whose voices have not been sufficiently heard, and whose pain has not been eased - these brothers and sisters we must find a way to lead - or simply to invite - back to the Church that has failed them. To all who have suffered and continue to feel like they no longer belong or have a place within the family that once nurtured their faith and contributed to their identity, I pledge to listen; to comfort however I can; to understand as best I am able;

and to exert every effort within my capacity to be an instrument of your healing.

A previous bishop of this Diocese - Bishop William Turner - who stood in this same place at his installation offered words that very closely resemble my sentiments these 102 years later: *“Today your bishop can only promise, and ask you to believe that his promises come sincerely from his heart. You deserve the very best that he can give you. ... On his part, as I say, he can only promise. He can promise co-operation in all your good works and enterprises; he can promise to be henceforth a sharer in your civic and religious activities, and more than that, a leader in all that you undertake to accomplish for God and country and the welfare of your city. This leadership will not be founded on any gifts that he may personally possess, but on the traditional and divinely-given constitution of the Church.”*

And so, let us now begin our journey together, moving forward arm-in-arm, in a spirit of fraternal love and support in the work of rebuilding. Let us again recall the words of the prophet Jeremiah in today’s first reading, who assures us that we have every reason to be confident and hopeful - assured that what God has begun in us and through us, he will bring to sure completion:

*“Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.”*

My Friends, sisters and brothers who have come to know and believe in the Lord Jesus as the Holy One of God - thank you for your warm and generous welcome. Let us now together go forth to announce anew God’s everlasting love and abiding faithfulness.

In all that we say and do, may we reflect His Truth, His spirit of compassion, care and love toward one another always and everywhere. AMEN!

