

**Homily for the Farewell Mass**  
**Feast of the Chair of St. Peter – 22 February 2020**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I feel that I am becoming an expert on chairs – dining room chairs, kitchen chairs, chairs for the sitting room and the bedroom. In fact, a whole world of furniture and kitchen appliances has opened up to me as I prepare to move into my retirement home! But what a strange name for a feast – the Chair of St. Peter! What's it all about?

The Chair is the symbol of St. Peter, of the one chosen by the Lord to preside over the whole Church in service and in charity. The chair is the symbol of the mission of teacher and pastor conferred by Jesus Christ on Peter and continued in an unbroken line down to the present Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis. So, today we celebrate the unity of the Church founded on the Apostle Peter and we renew our consent to the magisterium, the evangelical preaching and teaching of the Roman Pontiff. Ultimately, the chair of St. Peter is the sign of the love of God, the eternal shepherd, wanting to gather the whole Church and lead her on the path of salvation.

In the first reading from the First Letter of St. Peter, there is an encouragement to the leaders of the churches to watch over the flock, not simply as a duty but gladly and eagerly. And there is a call not to be a dictator but an example that the whole flock can follow. Surely, that guidance to be spiritual and to be examples applies not only to the leaders of the churches but to us all in our different roles as members of the Church.

In the Gospel Jesus declares Peter as the rock on which he will build his Church, a precious gift of unity for the churches throughout the world. The primacy of Peter, celebrated in this feast, is at the service of the whole Church and is the touchstone of authenticity in the life and mission of the Church. At the centre of the community of the Church is the Mass, and in the Eucharistic Prayer there is always a reference to our communion with Francis, our Pope.

Of course, there is also the reference to our communion with our Bishop. Just as we celebrate the Chair of St. Peter, so in each local Church, in each Diocese there is the chair of the Bishop placed in the Mother Church of the Diocese. That chair is called a cathedra and hence the word “cathedral” for the mother church. Again, the cathedra is the symbol of the bishop’s authority and, in particular, his magisterium, the teaching which, as a successor of the Apostles, he is called to safeguard and transmit.

It was on Tuesday, 28 June, 2005 that I first sat in the cathedra here in Northampton Cathedral after I had been ordained bishop. Perhaps some of you were here together with my late father and my family. I am grateful today, almost fifteen years later, for the opportunity to preside at this Farewell Mass with all of you, the family of the Diocese and with some of my own family. For me, this is a Mass of Thanksgiving, thanksgiving, first and foremost, to God for his love and mercy and for holding me in the palm of his hand every day of my life and especially during the years that I have been your bishop.

Secondly, it is a Mass of Thanksgiving for each of you and for the whole Diocese of Northampton because through you and through your prayer and

your example I have grown in my love of Jesus and in my love of the Church. I have also grown in the love of brothers and sisters in other churches, in other faiths and in people of no faith. I have been blessed with my experience of the Church in India and Pakistan, in the Holy Land and in Chile. And to be a Synod Father at the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2015 was a tremendous privilege, and to see the freshness of the churches on the African and Asian continents. What new life people and priests from those churches are bringing to our own parishes.

The day I arrived in Northampton for the first time in my life, I was asked what my vision for the Diocese was. I said, "Let me get to know the priests and people of the Diocese first." But the pressure was on, and two years later I produced what came to be known as "Walking Humbly with our God" with its three streams of energy – the creation of Pastoral Areas for parishes to work more closely together – the ongoing formation of the clergy – and lay formation – so that we can all become more aware of and active in our vocation to be holy and to be missionary disciples of Jesus, and to be mutually supportive, to go beyond the walls of our parishes.

A lesson I have had to learn is that none of us likes changes and that, in the end, it is the Holy Spirit who guides and directs us. God is the potter and we are the clay. Perhaps what I have come to know most of all is the lively faith and prayer of parishioners, the commitment in our schools, the prayerful presence and faithful witness of our religious communities, the value of the ministry of our Permanent Deacons, of whom I have ordained twenty-five, and the richness of our priests, diocesan and religious and those supporting us from abroad. No wonder our priests are described as the Bishop's principal co-

workers. Thank you for your loyalty, your support, your example and your friendship even though one of you, when he learned that I could not fry an egg, protested that for almost fifteen years he had been giving respect and obedience to a man who could not fry an egg! All of you, dear brother priests, who are so precious in the eyes of the Lord, have been and will continue to be precious to me. It has been very special to ordain eleven of you together with two Ordinariate priests. And how good it is that our students for the priesthood from Oscott and Rome are here today.

I am not able to fry an egg perhaps because I have had huge support from the staff in all our Diocesan Departments together with the staffs at the Cathedral and in Bishop's House. I should mention each of you individually but may I just say how much I owe to my PA, Tricia, to Siobhan our housekeeper in Bishop's House, and to Monsignor Sean Healy, the Vicar General, for his loyalty, wisdom and support throughout my time as bishop.

In the Eucharistic Prayer, a bishop refers to himself as an "unworthy servant." For the times I have been unworthy of you, I ask forgiveness. Now, with me let us praise God and thank him for his blessings, especially for the blessing of Bishop Elect David on this Feast of the Chair of St. Peter.

**+Peter Doyle**

**Bishop Emeritus of Northampton**