

HOMILY
ARCHBISHOP THOMAS G. WENSKI
Inauguration of the Basilica of
St. Michael the Archangel Church, Pensacola
February 10, 2012

Today, the faithful of this parish and representatives of this local Church of Pensacola-Tallahassee gather together in this beautiful and historical church, St. Michael the Archangel, to give thanks to God for the favor bestowed on this parish and on our diocese.

Congratulations to Father Peter McLaughlin and to the parishioners of St. Michael the Archangel. We also acknowledge the presence here of the Archbishop Emeritus of Mobile, Alabama. Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb and St. Michael's go back together a long way - he preached at Mass celebrating the restoration of this beautiful church some 26 years ago and much of the history of this parish and its role in the Panhandle is known thanks to his scholarship. Of course, I cannot fail to acknowledge the bishop emeritus of this local Church, Bishop John Ricard, who initially petitioned the Holy See to confer this honor on St. Michael's more than 10 years ago. While he could not be with us tonight, we know that this evening would not have been possible were it not for his efforts.

Yes, tonight, we raise up grateful prayers that Pope Benedict XVI in recognition of this parish's role in the history of the Catholic Church here in the Panhandle of Florida has seen fit to raise this parish church to the status and dignity of a minor basilica. Finally!

As a Basilica, besides the umbrellino and the tinnanabulum, the special umbrella and bell, St. Michael the Archangel Church is granted the privilege to display the Coat of Arms of Vatican City on its façade and the crossed keys of St. Peter on all its furnishings and liturgical appointments. Having in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee a basilica does underscore the special bond that joins this local Church to the successor of St. Peter, the "rock" upon whom, as we heard in today's gospel, Jesus would build his church. The unity that should exist among those who invoke the name of Jesus – that unity for which Jesus himself prayed – is realized cum Petro and sub Petro: with Peter and under Peter.

In a world of fragile peace and broken promises, this unity of the Body of Christ in faith, hope and charity - with Peter and under Peter -is more important than ever if our witness as Catholics is to be both coherent and convincing.

The roots of this parish church go back to before the establishment of our Republic and its Constitution. For much of this nation's history, Catholics were regarded by many of their neighbors with suspicion if not with hostility because of the prevailing prejudice towards the Catholic faith in a

predominantly Protestant America. Yet because of a healthy secularity promoted by our civil order and the Bill of Rights' first freedom, the freedom of religion, the pioneer Catholic families of Pensacola were able to put down roots in this community, built this church and worship freely and build institutions that not only served their fellow Catholics but also the broader community.

Today, that healthy secularity that provided for the separation of Church and State but not of religion from society, that healthy secularity that guaranteed the freedom of people of faith to serve the common good through hospitals, schools, orphanages and other charitable institutions, is increasingly under siege in America today. A radical secularism has emerged that seeks to reduce religious belief to just a "subjective opinion" and to privatize faith by denying it any public expression. Such a radical secularism promotes a world view in which God is excluded; it pretends that society can organize itself, that people can live their lives, as if God doesn't matter.

Let no one deceive him or herself. The on-going flap over the Obama administration's Department of Health and Human Services' mandate to force Catholics and others to violate their consciences is not about contraception or access to contraception. Contraceptive devices are easily found at corner gas stations; and a few universities have begun to sell "the morning after pills" like soda from coin-operated machines. What's at stake here is the first freedom of the Bill of Rights: our freedom of religion; and our freedom to serve according to the dictates of our conscience.

In his message for the soon-to-begin Lenten Season this year, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us Catholics: "We must not remain silent before evil." To adapt to the prevailing mentality, out of human respect or convenience, to fail to warn our brothers and sisters against ways of thinking or acting that are contrary to truth and right conduct is to fail in the charity that we owe them.

Spirituality in our Catholic tradition is more than just narcissistic navel gazing or an oversimplified sentimentalism that reduces spirituality to a one-time acceptance of Jesus. It is not a self-absorbed seeking after self-fulfillment found through esoteric teachings or practices. Christianity's invitation is to look outwardly and beyond. The heart of Christian life, the Holy Father insists in his Lenten message, is "charity". As Christians we are to express our concern for each other through the exercise of what the Catechism calls the "corporal" and "spiritual" works of mercy. Opening our hearts to others and their needs is an opportunity for each one of us for salvation and blessedness.

This beautiful and inviting Church continues in its third century to be here in Pensacola a beacon of faith, hope and love. It is an invitation written in brick and mortar to all who pass by to consider how meaningful and fulfilling are the lives of those who worship here are because they believe, against the prevailing secularism of our culture, that God does, in fact, matter. You, the

faithful and parishioners, are the "living stones" of this parish church, "built on the foundations laid by the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2: 19ff). This church made of "living stones" must also be an instrument to help others experience the one Savior of all mankind, Jesus Christ. Here, where his Word is proclaimed and his Sacraments are celebrated, God continues to call us to a "personal encounter" with him. Here in communion with the brethren, here in quiet prayer in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament, we can allow ourselves to be found by God.

Let us remember before the Lord all those whose past and present labors and struggles here have won the recognition of Pope Benedict XVI in his designation of this parish church as a minor basilica. And in the face of present and future challenges, let us invoke the intercession of St. Michael the Archangel:

St. Michael, the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly Hosts, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.