

# Archbishop Hebda stresses conversion during ordination of new bishop

ST. PAUL, Minn. (CNS) – Surrounded by the Spanish-speaking people he has ministered to throughout his two decades as a priest, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph A. Williams was ordained a bishop for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

During the ceremony at the Cathedral of St Paul on Jan. 25, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, Archbishop Bernard A. Hebda, who heads the archdiocese, described becoming a bishop as a rebirth, much along the lines of what the Apostle Paul experienced while on his way to Damascus.

While Bishop Williams today is more likely to be found on a bicycle than on a horse, the invitation to become a bishop that came in a Nov. 22 phone call from the U.S. papal nuncio “would be enough to knock any man, any priest to the ground,” Archbishop Hebda said.

The nuncio’s call came ahead of Pope Francis’ appointment of then-Father Williams as an auxiliary bishop on Dec. 10.

Despite temperatures hovering near zero degrees and wind chills below zero the day of his episcopal ordination, the cathedral was filled with family, friends and faithful of the archdiocese, among them representatives of several religious communities.

Many of them were Latino, an indication that, since being ordained a priest in 2002, Bishop Williams’ ministry has included a special affection for Spanish-speaking Catholics. In his current assignments as pastor of St. Stephen Parish and parochial administrator at Holy Rosary Parish, both in Minneapolis, he serves a predominantly Latino community.

The opening procession included Latina women and girls carrying flowers, and men, women and children wearing Latin American cultural dress, including a tunic with Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Accompanying Bishop Williams as a priest-chaplain during the Mass were his younger brother Father Peter Williams, pastor of St. Ambrose Parish in suburban Woodbury. In addition, a dozen bishops concelebrated the Mass.

After the Liturgy of the Word, Archbishop Christoph Pierre, papal nuncio to the United States, offered remarks before reading the papal mandate naming Bishop Williams as auxiliary bishop. It was Archbishop Pierre who placed the November phone call to Bishop Williams informing him of his appointment.

The nuncio then handed the mandate to Bishop Williams, who showed the document to Archbishop Hebda and then processed around the cathedral, holding it out to the faithful, who applauded and cheered as a Latino choir sang.

In his homily, Archbishop Hebda, the Mass' principal celebrant and the principal consecrator in the ordination rite, spoke about the archdiocese's patron saint, stressing the importance of conversion.

With particular beauty, he said, the 17th-century Roman painter Caravaggio captured St. Paul's conversion – which included being struck blind on his way to Damascus. In the masterpiece, Paul, “practically spilling out of the canvas,” is on his back with eyes closed, hands reaching to the heavens.

“It's not the dignified posture of an apostle or even of a Pharisee or Roman citizen,” Archbishop Hebda said of the painting, “Conversion on the Way to Damascus,” which is in a church in Rome. “Rather, it's much more reminiscent of a certain helpless infant next to a donkey in a Nativity scene.”

“What we’re dealing with here is rebirth,” Archbishop Hebda said. “Through this powerful encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul is reborn, even taking a new name: Paul. It’s out of this experience that knocks the self-confident Paul to the ground, rendering him vulnerable, that he would be able to convincingly share with the Corinthians: that ‘it is when I am weak, then I am strong.’”

The archbishop noted that the ordination rite includes going “to the ground,” as Bishop Williams would lie prostrate before the altar during a sung litany of the saints.

“We’re hoping that through (the saints’) spiritual accompaniment, you will be confirmed in your great desire to joyfully accept the new call that has been given you through Pope Francis,” Archbishop Hebda said, “even when you, like Paul, recognize it will, at times, be a sharing in Christ’s cross that requires you to die to yourself.”

Commending Bishop Williams’ “incredible natural gifts,” Archbishop Hebda said, “even they will pale in comparison to what the Lord desires to shower upon you today through the Holy Spirit.”

At the close of Mass, Bishop Williams, wearing his miter and a vestment with an embroidered icon of St. Paul, addressed the congregation in English and Spanish. He said that it was the work of God that brought about his ordination, and that he was hoping for what Archbishop Hebda preached about: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

“I don’t have a mission statement,” he said. “We heard the mission from Archbishop Pierre: I’m here to assist Archbishop Hebda in his pastoral care of this archdiocese.”

He continued: “All of us have one mission: to go out and proclaim the good news. What is the good news? It’s Jesus Christ.”

Bishop Williams ended his remarks with the words of St. John Paul II: "Follow Christ."

"You who are single, or who are preparing for marriage, follow Christ," he said. "You who are old or young, follow Christ. You who are sick or aging, follow Christ. You who feel the need of a friend, follow Christ."

Bishop Williams, 47, is one of the youngest Catholic bishops in the United States, according to data at [www.catholic-hierarchy.org](http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org).

*Wiering is editor of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.*