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Coadjutor Bishop Rojas welcomed at packed Mass

CHINO HILLS – When more than 2,000 of the Catholic faithful gathered at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Chino Hills on Feb. 24 to welcome Coadjutor Bishop Alberto Rojas to the Diocese there was a sense of both history and possibility in the air.

Bishop Gerald Barnes, the Principal Celebrant of the Welcome Mass for Bishop Rojas, quipped early on that the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States hadn't visited the Diocese since it was founded 42 years ago.

But Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the current Nuncio, was indeed one of the concelebrants and he offered words of welcome from Rome before reading Pope Francis' actual Apostolic Mandate declaring Bishop Rojas as the Coadjutor of San Bernardino. He specifically praised Bishop Rojas' pastoral gifts, youthful energy and ability to empathize.

"I am confident that this flock will have an ardent and gentle shepherd for years to come," Archbishop Pierre said.

After Archbishop Pierre read the Apostolic Mandate, he handed it to Bishop Rojas who made a brief procession through the church holding it in the air.

In all, 30 bishops attended the Welcome Mass as well as Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop Emeritus of Los Angeles, and Cardinal Blase Cupich, the Archbishop of Chicago, under whom Bishop Rojas had served as an auxiliary bishop. Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, who currently serves as President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops was also among the concelebrants at the Mass. Hundreds of priests and deacons, and strong showing of women religious joined in the celebration, along with lay representatives from the parishes and Catholic schools of the Diocese.

The Mass, which as livestreamed on the Diocesan YouTube channel, featured many hallmarks of diocesan liturgies, including different cultural traditions and liturgical movements. The Mass readings were proclaimed in Vietnamese, Igbo, Spanish and English. At the start of the Mass representatives of six different communities processed to sanctuary and presented Bishop Rojas with a gift while identifying their community. Those communities included Native American, Asian Pacific, African Descent, Hispanic, European-American and Youth and Young Adults, which shared a lengthy embrace with Bishop Rojas, who prioritized that ministry while in Chicago and says he would like to continue to do so in San Bernardino.

In a special touch, local liturgist Audrey Donaldson wrote a song based on Bishop Rojas' Episcopal motto "No Basta El Amor De Dios" (God's Love is All We Need) that was performed by the choir. That Episcopal motto and its connection to Bishop Barnes' Episcopal motto "Amar Es Entregarse" (Love is the total giving of one's self) was a central theme in Bishop Rojas' homily. He began his 30-minute

homily, given first in English and then in Spanish, joking “I never got more attention than I have today.”

His words took a more serious tone soon after, however, as he talked about the division and acrimony roiling society and the Church, a chief concern expressed by Pope Francis in the recent Ad Limina visit. “Division comes from the devil, unity comes from God,” he said, adding that “it is our task as missionary disciples to help the world distinguish the good from the bad.”

We cannot do that unless we are grounded in our free acceptance of God’s love, Bishop Rojas said, explaining both his motto and that of Bishop Barnes.

“If you have the will to give that love and receive that love then, yes, God’s love is all we need,” he said.

While it was clearly a day for the Church of San Bernardino to welcome Bishop Rojas, there were also moments to praise and reflect on the Episcopal leadership of Bishop Barnes over the past 28 years. At the end of Mass, initially at the urging of Father Romeo Seleccion, MS, pastor of St. Paul the Apostle, the congregation clapped and chanted “We-love-you.” Bishop Barnes, in turn, named and credited his predecessor, Bishop Phillip Straling, before reading a heartfelt congratulatory letter from the founding bishop of the Diocese, who was unable to attend the Mass in person.

Earlier in the day, at a breakfast reception, Cardinal Cupich made brief remarks praising Bishop Barnes as “visionary” and a constant voice of “prudence and wisdom” among the bishops of the United States. Bishop Rojas, his former boss said, has a “wonderful pastoral touch and a generous heart.”

“It’s really a good fit,” Cardinal Cupich said. “They’re going to work together in a way that brings a wonderful transition to this Diocese.”

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