



Homily at the Memorial Mass for the Repose of the Soul of Archbishop Adam Exner, OMI

Archbishop Miller, Bishop Monroe, Bishop Franken, brother priests and deacons, consecrated men and women, brothers and sisters:

It was a great honour to be asked to preach at this Mass for Archbishop Adam Exner. But it is a great challenge, as well.

Just to recount the inspiring story of his family origins would take half the time we have today, while the list of his accomplishments as priest and bishop would take *all* the time we have today. And of course, I am tempted to share some personal memories of the many years I worked at his side.

Actually, the temptation to add one personal memory was irresistible. It's very simple: during almost fourteen years of working together, I never heard him say an unkind thing about anyone. Not once.

But I leave all that aside in order to concentrate on Archbishop Exner's enduring contribution to this Archdiocese, something not of the past but of the present.

Two phrases resounded in my heart as I prepared for today's liturgy. We've just heard the first, from the Prophet Isaiah: "He has sent me to preach the good news to the oppressed." In slightly different form, this is the motto of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, of which Adam Exner was a member for 73 years.

The phrase, of course, rang out too in the synagogue at Nazareth, where Jesus himself proclaimed it.

The second phrase is less lofty, but in the life and ministry of Archbishop Exner it put flesh and bones on Isaiah's prophecy: *from maintenance to mission*. In the more formal language of his pastoral letter on the Archdiocesan Synod, "We need to move from a maintenance model of Church to become a more mission-driven, evangelizing Church."

The late Archbishop's vision of our local Church owed much to the prophecy of Isaiah; and his vision for the Synod has in many ways been fulfilled among us, to borrow from the words of Jesus in the synagogue. I see a direct line between the Archdiocesan Synod called by Archbishop Exner in 1998 and the evangelizing energy we see all around us today.

Nothing I could say about Archbishop Exner is half so important as the fact that he laid one of the foundation stones in the unfolding of the Divine plan for our local Church.

He was one of four Archbishops called to very distinct tasks in building up the household of God here in Vancouver in the modern age.

I say very distinct tasks because Archbishop Exner's predecessor was passionately devoted to maintenance! Taking away nothing from Archbishop James Carney's contributions to the building up of Catholic schools, the establishment of new parishes, and new ministries in areas such as marriage preparation, and justice services, his efforts were chiefly directed to maintaining fundamental Catholic truths and structures against an onslaught of forces that in many other dioceses led to significant harm and loss. He fought valiantly and successfully to keep the Faith strong and to ensure that his number one job was accomplished—maintaining communion with the successor of Peter.

Into that situation came a new archbishop who was deeply grateful for the solid community of lay faithful and clergy that he inherited, but who realized that the age of maintenance was over. He recognized this using a simple approach that he summarized as "see, judge, act," or as reading the "signs of the times."

When Archbishop Exner combined that discernment with his passionate conviction that we are called to proclaim the Good News to those who need it most, a new era began. He described that new era using the words of St. John Paul II: "a new springtime of faith and Christian living."

This vision was a Spirit-led response to the new reality of the Archdiocese, only recently transformed by the arrival of so many new Canadians that it could now be described as mission territory. He loved to recount how he wanted to go to the foreign missions when he was first ordained an Oblate—but now the missions had come to him.

Re-reading the pastoral letter on the Synod it's amazing how much of it reflects the direction of our Archdiocese today. There is a continuity with his two successors that can only be explained by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the first place, although Archbishop Raymond Roussin was not destined to lead the Archdiocese for long, he was the one who brought the Synod to its conclusion with his final declaration giving life to its recommendations. But it has fallen to Archbishop Miller to take those recommendations and to implement them in all their aspects and complexity, building on the solid foundation laid by his predecessors, and particularly by the Archdiocesan Synod.

Your Grace, we can only pray that the Synod you are about to attend in Rome is as fruitful as our own has been.

We continue to reflect on the signs of the times and to be guided by new insights from a new Pope but everything in the Archdiocese now seems laser-focused on proclaiming the Gospel. The Upper Room Conference to be held here next weekend [is precisely about becoming “a much more missionary and evangelizing Church,” as Archbishop Exner wrote. Anticipating Pope Francis’s term “missionary disciples,” he said, “we need to become missionaries right here at home.”

Today we give thanks for the gift of a pastor—one who built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. We pray that in Christ our beloved Archdiocese continues to grow into a holy temple, a dwelling-place for God, in the beautiful words of St. Paul to the Ephesians (cf. 2:20-22).

Since in his life and leadership Archbishop Exner echoed the prophecy of Isaiah that Jesus himself proclaimed, we can also imagine our Lord’s words from today’s Gospel on the lips of our late Archbishop.

Surely Archbishop Exner made Jesus's prayer his own. He too desired that those whom the Father had given him to shepherd be with the Son, see his glory, and share a heavenly reward. Today we claim that same reward for our brother Adam, certain that as Christian, priest, and bishop, he made known the Father's name to many, because that is surely what it means to bring good news to the poor.

Msgr. Gregory N. Smith

September 12, 2023

Holy Rosary Cathedral, Vancouver, BC