

New Bishop of Nelson Diocese has Edmonton roots



Servers approach the altar during Eucharist Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Following the example of St. Mark, Catholics are called to be evangelists, spreading the Gospel in their individual way even in a society increasingly hostile to faith, says Bishop Gregory Bittman.

“As Pope Francis said, true evangelization takes place under the action of the Holy Spirit,” Bishop Bittman said in his installation ceremony April 25 as the new shepherd of the Diocese of Nelson, B.C.



Retiring Bishop of Nelson, John Corriveau, OFM Cap. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

“This means as evangelizers, we need to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and to use the gifts that we have been given, in order to fulfill our mission to evangelize. This way we can introduce the world to Christ and bring to everyone you meet, the joy of the Gospel.”

‘Bishop Greg’ served as Auxiliary Bishop of Edmonton – his hometown – for nearly six years before his appointment as the new Bishop of Nelson, succeeding Most Rev. John Corriveau who is retiring.

His appointment included ceremonies at the Immaculate Conception Church in Kelowna on April 25, and at the Cathedral of Mary Immaculate in Nelson on April 26.

In the elaborate ceremony, the church was filled with 20 bishops, rows of clergy, women religious and the Catholic faithful, friends and family. After knocking on the door of the church to enter as the new bishop, Bishop Bittman was welcomed into his new diocese. He said his priority to get to know the Diocese of Nelson and to have the community get to know him.



Jacob Vandre Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Jacob Vandre, a parishioner at Immaculate Conception Parish who came to the installation with his grandmother, said he's looking forward to getting to know Bishop Bittman.

"I just said if he wants to come over for dinner, he's more than welcomed. He said he'll consider it."

"The bit that I read about him," added Leanne Hopegood, who works at Immaculate Conception parish, "I think he's going to fit into Kelowna and the Nelson Diocese really well."

Bittman noted in his first homily, on the feast day of St. Mark, that the writer of the Gospel was a "timid evangelist" when compared to the "fiery and superzealous" of St. Paul during the early days of the Church.

Bittman noted all Christians are tasked with a mission in their own individual way, to follow in Jesus' call to spread the Good News of his salvation, "to all the peoples of the world to the very ends of the world."

"St. Mark, and all of the evangelists who follow after the Apostles, show us that Jesus' words to evangelize were not lost on them. Nor can they be with us," Bittman told his new diocese of nearly 80,000 Catholics.

Bittman continued to state that evangelization was – and still is – key to the future of the Church.

"Just think ... had the Apostles kept to themselves or restricted the Good News to a select few, or adopted the attitude of indifference and didn't care about their fellow human beings and did not proclaim the salvation to be found in Jesus Christ, would there have been a Church? Or even the Church we know and are accustomed to today?"

As the Apostles and early disciples were called to evangelize, so is each individual Christian – despite temptations "to keep quiet, to keep the faith to ourselves ... or to live what could be called a secret Christian life where no-one would even know or even guess that we are Christian," Bishop Bittman said.

"Unfortunately the secular world encourages this. It wants faith out of the public square. It wants the voice of faith to be silenced. Ultimately it wants a faithless, godless world," he said.

"As Christians, whose very mission is to evangelize, we cannot be indifferent to this. Certainly we cannot buy into it or go along with it. This goes against the very words of Jesus in our Gospel. This goes against the mission of the Church, which was entrusted to her by Jesus."



Kim McLennan-Robbins with newly installed Bishop Bittman Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Kim McLennan-Robbins, who lives in Edmonton, is among friends and family who made the journey to the diocesan celebration in Kelowna. She said she will miss Bishop Bittman, but she's grateful her friend of 17 years is not far away.

"He is truly a gift from God to his [Nelson] diocese," she said. "Obviously I'm going to miss him in Edmonton, but when I go home to Fernie, we'll know that he is our bishop there and that's exciting for us. I know we'll be forever connected."

Among the bishops from across Canada who attended the installation were Thomas Cardinal Collins, Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton, and Archbishop Luigi Bonazzi – the papal nuncio to Canada – who brought greetings from Pope Francis to a crowd which also included First Nations elders and leaders.

That continuing outreach to the indigenous community is among the challenges facing Bishop Bittman.

"One big one for me is opening the Church evermore to the giftedness of our First Nations peoples," said outgoing Bishop John Corriveau. "It would bring great richness to our diocese."



Newly installed Bishop Bittman shares a moment with Papal Nuncio Luigi Bonazzi before his celebratory banquet. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

"He will be a wonderful Bishop of Nelson," added Cardinal Thomas Collins of

Toronto. "I was delighted during the time I was Archbishop of Edmonton with the tremendous work that Bishop Bittman did when he was chancellor and, of course, as auxiliary bishop more recently."

For now, Bishop Bittman said his first priority is to acclimatize to the Diocese of Nelson community, both metaphorically and literally – with his signature sense of humour.

"Of course everything is brand new. I feel totally lost. I don't know my way around. I've been using Google Maps constantly just to find a store," Bittman joked in an interview.

"It's beautiful. I'm out in the country again, and it reminds me of when I was a parish priest (in rural Alberta). I listen to the birds in the morning. It's peaceful. I'm looking at the mountains."

That sense of humour was reciprocated, even during the installation ceremony.

"We are looking forward to your visit to our parish and our parish missions," said Sylvia Jurys, president of the Nelson Diocese Catholic Women's League of Canada, who spoke on behalf of the laity in the diocese.



Bittman enjoys B.C.s scenery from his new Kelowna home. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

"We hope that you will take time to take in the magnificent vistas of our beautiful province of British Columbia" through the Kootenays into the wine country from the towns in the south Okanagan "and their big bold reds to Kelowna where the pinot noirs are magnificent, and also the chardonnay."

Jurys also mentioned that the 1,500 members of the 23 chapters of the Catholic Women's League in the Diocese, "are old enough to be your mother and are anxious to meet you."

She also made a promise to Bishop Bittman, known for his penchant for candy. "You know that infamous candy bowl? We assure you that it will always be full."

At the end of the installation ceremony, Bishop Bittman himself made a tribute to his predecessor using his characteristic humour: "For those of you who think Bishop John is quite torn and broken up about leaving, just so you know, he's had his bags packed for three weeks!"



Bittman serves Communion to his mother Fran Bittman
Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media