

# Leading the

# FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



## “Exercising Spiritual Fatherhood”

For any Catholic father who loves and cares for his children, among the many virtues he exercises for their well-being, three stand out: a good father protects them, prays for them, and pursues them when they stray.

Just last week, gathered together for the annual USCCB Spring meeting in Baltimore with all my brother bishops from the United States, among the many topics we treated, the most crucial of course was to vote on measures to address the accountability of bishops in the sexual abuse scandal. In addition, there were two others worthy of mention here: one was the approval of the new text for the Rite of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests and of Deacons; the other was a report and discussion on reaching out to those who are religiously unaffiliated.

Now, at first glance, one might be hard pressed to see the connection between the three. But as the meeting concluded, it struck me that these three topics, seemingly unrelated, were in fact intertwined in a way that highlights the virtues bishops are called to exercise as spiritual fathers.

In order to best protect our flocks, the bishops seriously debated, voted on and approved three significant measures to hold themselves accountable for instances of sexual abuse of children or vulnerable persons, sexual misconduct, or the intentional mishandling of such cases (<http://bit.ly/DOTaccountability>). These are: a Protocol Regarding Available Non-Penal Restrictions on Bishops; a statement “Affirming Our Episcopal Commitments”; and Directives for the Implementation of the Provisions of the Holy Father’s most recent Apostolic letter “*Vos estis lux mundi*” (<http://bit.ly/DOTletter>) Concerning Bishops and their Equivalents. In addition, the bishops established a new third-party reporting system and committed to involving and utilizing lay professional experts

in the entire process. These commitments and safeguards will, please God, help all to move forward together and will bring an unprecedented accountability throughout the hierarchy in the Church in the United States.

In order to best pray for the flock, the bishops approved the new text for the Rite of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests and of Deacons. The text is significant because it includes the ceremony of ordination during which the priest candidate who is to become a bishop makes the promises of his office, which include lifelong prayer for the people of God, obedience, chaste celibacy and the sacrifice of one’s life for the sake of the flock. This new formulation of the ritual once again highlights the sacred ministry being entrusted and underscores the integrity of life to which the bishop, priest or deacon is called. The very prayer texts that were approved are a reminder of who the bishop is in relation to his flock. During the ceremony of ordination the flock prays fervently for him, especially during the Litany of the Saints when he prostrates on the floor in a posture of abandonment to the Lord. From the new ritual text it is once again made clear that the bishop’s teaching, governing and sanctifying roles are supported by the prayers of his people, and the focus of his own prayer for the sake of the flock.

In order to best pursue those who stray from or are not members of the flock, the bishops heard a sobering report from Bishop Robert Barron, Chair of the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, who highlighted

concerning statistics about the number of young people who abandon the practice of their Catholic faith at a young age, who no longer affiliate with the Church or who have never been part of any Church. It was striking to feel the enthusiasm and zeal of the bishops for engaging in efforts to reach out to our youth, millennials, “nones” and others, and to turn attention vigorously to accompany and invite them to an encounter with Jesus Christ and his Church. While the sexual abuse scandal has certainly attributed to such straying from religious faith and practice, it is incumbent upon us to continue strenuously to work to evangelize our young people in the Joy of the Gospel.

For any Catholic bishop who loves and cares for his children, among the many virtues he exercises for their well-being, three stand out: a good spiritual father protects them, prays for them, and pursues them when they stray. As a further local initiative in responding forthrightly to the sexual abuse scandal, the Diocese has created a prayer card for victim-survivors, copies of which will be sent to every parish, and made available upon request from the Pastoral Center (<http://bit.ly/DOThealing>). I invite you to distribute these widely and to join me in praying this “Prayer for Healing Victims of Abuse.”

Please also pray with and for me, the spiritual father of the family of faith of the Diocese of Toledo, that I may do everything in my power and continue to dedicate myself completely to exercising spiritual fatherhood for your well-being: protecting the flock, praying for the flock and pursuing those who stray from or are not members of the flock.

*+ Daniel E. Thomas*

Most Rev. Daniel E. Thomas  
Bishop of Toledo  
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