

Justin Welby installed as 105th Archbishop of Canterbury

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) Justin Welby, the 57-year old former oil executive who quit the world of high finance in 1992 to become a priest, was enthroned Thursday (March 21) as the 105th archbishop of Canterbury and spiritual leader of the world's 77 million Anglicans.

With Prince Charles and Camilla the Duchess of Cornwall looking on, Welby struck his pastoral staff three times on the door of the ancient Canterbury Cathedral, seeking admission to assume his throne in a ceremony that mixed age-old pageantry with contemporary praise and worship songs.

"Who are you and why do you request entry?" a young woman from the congregation asked, greeting Welby at the door.

"I am Justin, a servant of Jesus Christ, and I come as one seeking the grace of God, to travel with you in his service together," he responded.

Welby was led up to the altar where the Church of England's No. 2 official, Ugandan-born Archbishop of York John Sentamu, asked Welby to swear an oath of faithfulness to the Church of England and to its supreme governor, Queen Elizabeth II.

The cathedral's dean then presented Welby with the Canterbury Gospels, brought to England by St. Augustine on the orders of Pope Gregory the Great in 597 A.D. He bent low and kissed the ancient book in reverence.

Welby was then enthroned on two seats: the diocesan throne as head of the Diocese of Canterbury, and then the upright stone chair of St. Augustine to signify his position of "Primate of All England."

Welby, a married father of five, had been a bishop in Durham for only a year when he was tapped to succeed Rowan Williams as Britain's top churchman. He inherits a church wracked by internal divisions over the ordination of women bishops and continuing strains within the larger Anglican Communion over divisive issues of sexuality.

Welby made no specific mention in his sermon of the challenges that await him, but spoke in his sermon of not being afraid of new things, fresh challenges.

"Fear imprisons us and stops us being fully human," he said, adding: "The present challenges of environment and economy can only be faced with extraordinary courage."

He said that the church transforms itself "when it takes the risks of renewal in prayer, of reconciliation and of confident declaration of the good news of Jesus Christ."

Thursday's ceremony marked the second major transfer of power this week, coming two days after Pope Francis was formally installed at the Vatican. The men sent greetings to each other.

The new archbishop smiled and occasionally laughed as he watched African Anglicans dance and sing. Another group from India read poetry and a Christian group from Burundi in central Africa blessed the new church leader. Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, the only woman to lead a national branch of the Anglican Communion, also attended.

Many in the British press speculated over the role of a woman, Archdeacon Sheila Watson, in formally installing Welby in the Canterbury throne. Cathedral spokesman Christopher Robinson said there's no larger message to read into Watson's role. "The Archdeacon of Canterbury has always fulfilled this part of the ceremony," he said. "At this enthronement, the person involved simply happens to be a woman."

Welby's friends say he is a skilled negotiator who is able to change his mind easily on explosive subjects, and a man who brings a businessman's eye and fiscal savvy at a time when the church is facing big financial challenges.

Williams, who left the post to return to teaching at Oxford, had said his successor would need "the constitution of an ox and the skin of a rhinoceros."

While he remains opposed to a new British law that would sanction same-sex marriage, Welby surprised the church's pro-gay lobby by telling a reporter from the BBC that some gay couples have loving, stable and monogamous relationships of "stunning" quality.

Despite his closeness to the British establishment and his considerable personal wealth, he is regarded as a "man of the people." Soon after being appointed, Welby annoyed senior politicians by speaking out against enormous salaries and bonuses paid to bankers. He has also condemned proposed cuts to the government's welfare program.

While some observers see him trying to position the church as a kind of "unofficial opposition" to the center-right government led by Prime Minister David Cameron, Welby said he only seeks to "be clear about what Christian values are. Being political is necessary. Being party political is something you avoid."