

Priesthood & Diaconate Ordinations
August 4, 2012
Holy Ghost Haven
Mgbidi, Imo State

I. Introduction

It is a great, great joy for me to be here with the 15 deacon candidates and the 10 priesthood candidates for ordination. I rejoice with all of your fellow Spiritans, your families and fellow townspeople who are thrilled this day. They are joined by your friends and fellow Catholics who praise God for the great gift the 25 of you are to the family of faith.

I thank Father Peter Agbonome, the Provincial Superior of the Spiritans, for the honor extended to me in inviting me to preside at this ordination. My coming is testimony to the extended ministry of the Spiritans and evidence of your keeping alive your two founders' vision, namely that of Francis Poullart des Places and Francis Mary Paul Libermann, of embracing on a world-wide basis the needs of the poor and suffering. In God's providence, this vision of evangelization is now rooted in the Spiritan Community of Southeast Africa.

I come from the Diocese of Des Moines located in the heartland of the U.S.A. Exemplifying the evangelistic generosity and widespread dedication are four brother Spiritans – Felix Onuora, Remigius Okere, Anthony Adibe, and Emmanuel Ogwuoke who have adapted our Iowan ways blending them with their Spiritan, Ibo and African culture. It is a life-giving blend and we in Southwest Iowa are enormously grateful for their ministry.

Today I also welcome the opportunity to ordain to the diaconate – Ephraim Udo-uso and Evaristus Chibuzo Asadu of the Order of Saint John the Baptist.

Indeed, this is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad. Alleluia, Alleluia!!

II. Homily

This morning 25 young men culminate a decade or more of intense preparation for diaconate and priesthood. The outcome of their ordination is that they will be forever configured to Christ.

In a recent visit to Milan, Italy, Pope Benedict XVI told a group of gathered clergy, seminarians and consecrated men and women the following:

“If Christ, to build His Church, puts himself into the hands of the priest, the priest in his turn must entrust himself to Christ without reserve; love for the Lord Jesus is the soul of

the priestly ministry and the reason for it, just as it was the premise for him to assign to Peter . . . do you love me more than these? . . . Feed my lambs.” (Jn 21:15)

This love of Jesus, personal, penetrating and lasting – serves as the basis of the life and ministry of the priest and deacon. Winds may blow, rains may inundate, the earth may quake, but the priest and deacon who remains steadfast in love of Jesus will be able to persevere. That priest or deacon will experience enduring peace. The outcome of the ministry entrusted to him – that is of he who stands “in loco Christi” “in the place of Christ” will be successful.

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A year or so ago on a visit to Côte d’Ivoire I was privileged to meet a man who understood what it means to say that Jesus came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God.

This individual from the African country of Benin was the head of the United Nations mission to assist Côte d’Ivoire to begin anew after decades of civil war.

I was astounded as he described his mission which would consist of simulating forgiveness, compassion, understanding and cooperation. Properly implemented this plan would instill hope. He was confident that all are capable and can achieve this way of life, despite their miserable past and so many years of self-inflicted suffering.

I commented, in a very public setting, how impressed I was with his vision.

With no hesitation, he replied, “Well, Bishop, I am a Catholic. I believe profoundly in the new man. In and through Jesus each man who believes is re-born. All of us are capable of doing these things. It can be a way of living. It is the coming of the Kingdom of God.”

As deacons and priests you will be called to present such a vision. You will challenge your congregations to be those who strive to build the Kingdom of God. With Isaiah you are commissioned as was Jesus in Luke IV to: “Bring good news to the poor, bind up hearts that are broken, to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord . . .”

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In ordination, a certain mark, a specific identity will be imparted and sealed on your souls as a deacon and then again as a priest. This identity enables you, in each case, to undertake a special role in introducing the Kingdom of God.

For those of you as deacons the distinctive feature of your ministry will be that of a servant. Jesus provided us with the powerful image of a servant. After he had finished the paschal meal with those whom he loved, he went to each of his apostles and washed their feet. This was normally a menial task assigned to the least of the servants. After

doing so, Jesus instructed his companions simply: “what I have done for you, you must do for one another.”

What Jesus expects of deacons is not only that you do good things for others, but that through ordination you become configured with Christ and take on the heart of a servant. Wherever you go, whomever you are with, whatever you are doing your heart is to be that of a servant. This identity of a servant is linked to the foundational love of Jesus. Consequently, like Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, whenever you serve the least of our brothers and sisters, you serve Jesus himself.

The priest and bishop who is subsequently ordained retains the deaconate identity as servant. But ordination to these orders also advances their identity of being one with Jesus.

The person ordained priest is further transformed to stand “in loco Christi” “in the place of Christ.” He is identified with Jesus as victim in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. He becomes joined with Christ, the priest – through him with him and in him – and the return gift is made to the Father. The paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus, is not repeated but made present through the identity of the priest.

The priest does not become a part of this priestly sacrificial moment for his own sake but rather is joined by all the faithful who by their baptism become a priestly people.

In this way, the priest is ordained to be a servant. As a servant of the priestly people he is the instrument of the paschal sacrifice making Christ present in real time.

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The marvelous and special charism of the Spiritan Fathers is that you are willing to go to many different places in your ministry. You thereby demonstrate the great truth that all people – regardless of race, color, ethnicity are all God’s people. Every man and woman is invited to embrace the Gospel vision that each indeed is a beloved son or daughter of a loving God.

The ministry you undertake as deacons and priests inaugurates the Kingdom of God. Thus, you are not limited to the world’s ways characterized by a purely material orientation whose reward and satisfaction come only in the here and now. No, you are men of the Gospel which transcends time. Your ordination today underscores specific character traits that will proclaim the Christ in you, whose love captivates you and enables you to live in Gospel ways.

As priests, you will be called to make Christ present through the sacraments. With your Spiritan confreres you will be sent out as the 72 disciples in the Gospel were. The message to you is that you must be intent on the mission entrusted to you and not be distracted as you go about what God sends you for. You must trust absolutely that God

will take care of you. You are to be poor – for God’s sake, that His people will be enriched by the living Word you proclaim.

Secondly, beginning with the diaconate you are called to be celibate for the sake of the Kingdom. This does not mean you lose your sexuality – but imitating Jesus, as Spouse of the Church, you utilize your masculinity with its attendant energy and force for the love of God and His people. Such a reality was brought home to me when the people of the parish where I was first pastor told me that they felt a special relationship with me – a spousal relationship. I was there for them exclusively. They felt united with me as family.

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As you go forth as deacons and priests you ask – what will support me most in my new identity? What can I do that will help me to be faithful in the mission Christ has entrusted to me?

In a word, it is prayer.

St. John Vianney, whose feast we celebrate on this day, August 4th, was renowned for being a man of prayer. He was a holy man. He stands as a model priest. This is how he described prayer:

“Prayer is nothing else but union with God. When one has a heart that is pure and united with God, he is given a kind of eternity and sweetness that makes him ecstatic, a light that surrounds him with marvelous brightness. In this intimate union, God and the soul are fused together like two bits of wax that no one can pull apart. This union of God with a tiny creature is a lovely thing. It is a happiness beyond understanding.”

Thus, we come full circle and once again attribute the great vocation of priesthood to the love of Christ for me; for each of us, and for the ability to respond in total love for him.

I have been a priest for nearly 44 years. If I had a thousand lives, they would all gladly be as a priest. To be honest, though, to survive the pitfalls, the bumps and potholes in the road in life, it was and is necessary to pray.

If you are faithful to the liturgy of the hours which you have solemnly promised to do along with those consecrated to Jesus around the world, God, in turn will guide you. He will be faithful to you. Secondly, I encourage you to pray the rosary daily. It unites us with Jesus through his Mother who is the model disciple.

When I was a teenager my father took very ill, near to death. I promised to Mary that if my Father recovered, I would say the rosary every day. He recovered and lived to 85. I discovered over time that my promise was not a gift to Mary – but a remarkable gift to me. Because in fulfilling the promise, I grew – and even when I didn’t feel like it, I

prayed every day through Mary. In this way, she has kept me in touch always with her Son, Jesus.

My brothers, I assure you that your diaconate and priesthood will be immeasurably enriched through your relationship with Jesus and his Blessed Mother.

Jesus, Servant and High Priest,
Pray for us.

Mary, Queen and Mother of deacons and priests,
Pray for us.