

Homily

Ordination of Permanent Deacons

August 14th, 2010

After four years of intensive preparation, the 13 men being ordained today reached a consensus about their identity as deacons. They have come to understand that their role is derived from the root meaning of the title deacon – to serve, to be a servant.

The origin of the ministry of deacon is traced to the earliest days of the Church. The first community of believers was growing rapidly and to no one's surprise – even at that time, rivalries arose. The Hebrew widows were ostensibly faring better than their Greek counterparts in the daily distribution of bread.

The twelve apostles realizing their primary role was to proclaim God's word – sought out individuals filled with the Spirit of Wisdom and spiritual men to address the issue. They identified seven. With the laying on of hands, the first deacons were ordained and set aside for service.

The permanent diaconate was dormant in the Church's life for centuries, being revived with the Second Vatican Council. As it evolves in our own time, the original notion of service prevails. To a man, the 13 candidates for ordination will assert that what is involved is not merely being of service – helping in one capacity or another.

Rather, their call is to form within themselves the heart of a servant – modeling themselves after Jesus – “who came to serve and not to be served.” Thus, by whom they are in all circumstances they attempt to read the needs and situations of others and be there for them as one who serves in light of these needs. Their master becomes the one before them, to whom they are called to respond with the very gift of themselves.

Deacons are ordained to exercise their role as agents of the Diocese in close collaboration with the Bishop. Thus, like priests, they are assigned by the Bishop to minister to a local parish, and in doing so to bring about unity – seeking to generate unity throughout the Diocesan community as we are fashioned into one mind and one heart.

Demonstrating their broader role of service, each of the 13 deacons will take on ministries beyond a particular parish. In cooperation with the diocese, they will engage in such diverse services as chaplain to the airport, involvement with rural life, work with the homeless, with those in chronic poverty, with the communication outreach of the diocese, with the diocesan marriage program, with biomedical ethical concerns. They will devote their significant natural and developed talents to the work of the church as true servants of the Kingdom.

The second role which is attributed to the deacon is that of ministry of the Word. In the ordination rite to follow, each of the ordinandi will be presented with the Book of the Gospels and told:

*Receive the Gospel of Christ
whose herald you have become
Believe what you read
teach what you believe
and practice what you teach.*

Like the prophets of old, deacons are invited to consume this Word of God so that having digested it, this word infiltrates every fiber of their being.

Then, in the spirit of the 72 disciples they are called to go forth and proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom. This is done by them explicitly in preaching, in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, in Bible Studies and retreats. Implicitly it occurs by their witness in the

secular world through compassion, advocacy of social justice, living by ethical standards that bespeak an underlying foundation of reverence for the life and dignity of every human person.

In short, the deacon is called to be a leader in Evangelization – “To make Jesus Christ known and loved in our times, by choosing to live out the Gospel at every moment.”

The third role of the deacon in unison with that of Minister of Service and Word is that of Minister of the Eucharist. The deacon has an assigned, formal role in the celebration of Mass. While he performs a function at Eucharist, the far more important consideration is symbolic.

What the deacon expresses by his close association with the Eucharistic sacrifice is the attachment of himself to Jesus in the expression of the paschal mystery. For with the Son of God, the deacon is willing to die to himself and become one with Jesus in the return gift to the Father – a reality that is made present in each celebration of Mass and which especially authenticates the deacon as Servant.

St. Augustine highlighted this reality as it was witnessed by St. Lawrence, an early deacon martyr of the Church. In a homily, Augustine stated:

“As you have often heard, Lawrence was a deacon of the Church of Rome. There he ministered the sacred blood of Christ; there for the sake of Christ’s name he poured out his own blood.”

Saint John the Apostle was evidently teaching us about the mystery of the Lord’s supper when he wrote:

“Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

Lawrence understood this and, understanding, he acted on it. Just as he had a portion of the gift of self at the table of the Lord so he prepared to offer such a gift. In his life he lived Christ, in his death he followed in his footsteps.” (Sermon 304)

We welcome the 13 men ordained to the Order of Deacon today. They are a gift to the Diocese of Des Moines as it begins its 100th year as the Body of Christ in the 23 counties of Southwest Iowa. Their particular role as members of this Body is inspiring to us all – encouraging us, each in his or her own way, to re-dedicate ourselves to the vital, irreplaceable role that Christ has entrusted to each of us.

I had a fresh insight into what the impact of the presence of the Church, of God’s Body can be in our turbulent world which can breed discouragement because of its secular, amoral culture.

On a return trip home from Russia from a vacation there with a friend, I was seated next to a young Russian by the name of Peter. For the sake of comfort on the 10-hour flight I had a sports shirt on. His eyes bugged when I told him I was from Iowa. His mother, though originally from Russia, lived in Oskaloosa, Iowa, and Peter did his high school years there.

As our conversation deepened, he asked me, unaware of my role, whether I believed in God. Very definitely, I assured him. When I asked him the same question, he demurred and shrugged his shoulders. I asked him, then, what the Church meant to him – he smiled slightly, and said the Church, indeed its Believers, are those who give Hope.

We are a people who radiate Hope – who bring this great gift to others and enable them in some fashion to see beyond their discouraging, limited circumstances to an appreciation of their personal value.

We are grateful to the 13 deacons, to their brothers already ordained to this Order, to their wives – for being dedicated to their particular role in the Body of Christ so that this body, Christ alive in our world today, indeed all of us together, may be the vehicle of Hope for our brothers and sisters in the human family.