

Homily
Deacon Ordination
Diocese of Des Moines
Cohort XIV
August 16, 2014

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.”

The joy that Jesus experiences is found in the fulfillment of his identity, as Son of God. He gives himself fully to the Father out of love. He conforms to the Father’s will and in so doing experiences total unity. From this dedication to the Father flows happiness and a deep sense of peace.

The nine men who have completed a four year journey to the diaconate in companionship with their generous wives, have come upon this feeling of Christian joy as they open themselves to the working of the Spirit in their lives.

They have arrived from different paths and widely varying life experiences, but their eventual destination is the same. Each felt the interior call to identify with Jesus. Each responded in a unique fashion and eventually funneled himself into the narrow roadway of discipleship and conversion in the Spirit of Jesus. Each candidate presents himself this morning to be forever identified with Christ the Servant.

Since its inception in the Acts of the Apostles, with the prayer and imposition of hands over the seven chosen for their spirituality and prudence, the diaconate has represented Christ the Servant. The current nine being ordained as well as their immediate predecessors, ordained four years ago, have fashioned themselves in the mode of Christ, the model for servant leadership. This service is rendered in two principal ways.

The first is within the context of the parish community. This giving of oneself is anchored in the Ministry of the Altar whereby the deacon testifies to the profound reality that the Eucharist, the source and summit of worship, sustains God’s life in each of us. What the deacon is about in service is derived and enabled through union with the Eucharistic Lord.

By extension, the deacon is involved in sacramental ministry when officiating at Baptism and witnessing marriages. God's life is initiated in each person through pouring of the baptismal waters. The bond of Christ's presence is activated as man and wife seal their oneness through the exchange of wedding vows.

An invaluable service that the deacon provides is preaching or presenting the homily at Mass. In the face of such an awesome task, called to speak in God's name, one normally experiences anxiety or fear. As so frequently occurs in the Scriptures, the Lord notes this anxiety and in addressing the prophet Jeremiah speaks to the ages to those entrusted with proclaiming God's Word:

“Have no fear before them
Because I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.
Then the Lord extended his hand and
touched my mouth, saying
See I place my words in your mouth.”

God fortifies the deacon in preaching because this communication originates from the ongoing relationship that the deacon has established in his union with the Lord in daily prayer, meditation and inspiration. Effective preaching is also enabled by closeness to those hearing the message. He is instructed to be well aware of the joys and sorrows, the hopes and disappointments of those he ministers to.

Along with the priest, ordination opens the door to the deacon for leadership and activating the vision of the parish. He is called to build the Body of Christ by enabling his fellow parishioners to fully realize and then own the talents God has given each of them in order to exercise personal gifts in parish life.

The second appointment that each deacon receives is to service and charity. This particular responsibility goes beyond the parish and seeks to witness on a broader humanitarian scale the universality of Christ, the icon of service.

Pope Francis in both speech and action has urged Church communities to forage out into the peripheries of society – among the poor, the alienated, the suffering, the persecuted, victims of crime and prejudice, the incarcerated, etc. with the mercy and compassion of Christ. He calls for us to touch those cast off in our “throw-away” society by according them the dignity to which they are entitled as children of God.

Thus, in the ministry of service and charity, the deacon reaches out to women and men in prison or jail, those addicted to drugs, alcohol, and pornography, to the homeless, to those afflicted with mental illness, to the refugee, to those suffering from broken relationships.

In today’s second reading the shepherd’s role is highlighted for the benefit of the deacon, which is fulfilled in reaching out to the poor, sick and alienated. Again, the deacon is not called to be an independent agent but an example so that others may see the need through him and become a part of the field hospital attending to so many requiring healing. Through this united ministry the Body of Christ is activated and those living on the sidelines of society are beneficiaries of God’s attention and feel God’s presence.

In the same call to outreach, Pope Francis highlights the importance for the minister to take on the smell of the sheep. With the deacon all of us are called to be close, to touch, to communicate tenderness to those burdened by pain and hurt.

The vision which Pope Francis sets before all of us is remarkably simple but incredibly elusive. We belong to one human family, all daughters and sons of a loving God. This reality makes us sisters and brothers in this one family of humankind. The challenge is to activate that reality in our relationships. It is incumbent upon the deacon, therefore, as the icon of Christ the Servant, to witness to the life and dignity of each person, near and far. He stimulates the expectation that the reality of human peace with God’s grace might actually take shape.

Today, we rejoice in God's beneficial Providence. In the ordination of these nine individuals, along with their gallant and very capable wives, they will bring the joy of God to the world and enable the love of Jesus to both be experienced and propagated by their ministry and motivating example. We thank the deacon couples for their generosity, sacrifice and openness to God's Voice in their lives.

May they be ever mindful of the Words Jesus addresses to them this morning: it is "I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another."