

# Archbishop Lori's Address: Deacon Convocation; Turf Valley

*Deacon Convocation Address*

*Turf Valley*

*Sept. 21, 2019*

## **Introduction**

First, let me say how happy I am to be among you and to have the opportunity first and foremost to thank you for your ministry, to thank you, the wives and your families, for sharing in this ministry of diakonia, and to offer a few reflections before taking time for your observations and questions.

We gather in convocation at what continues to be a difficult time in the Church's life, "a wintry season" as one commentator described it. It is a time when, no matter the weather, we feel a distinct chill that continues to grip our church in the wake of last year's revelations - the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report and the unraveling of Theodore McCarrick - and the steady drumbeat of stories concerning abusive behavior and malfeasance on the part of some bishops and other clergy and church leaders, past and present.

And even if the sexual abuse crisis were more or less dormant, we would still feel a chill in the air as many young people depart the Church. Bishop Robert Barron and many other commentators have pointed to the exodus of Millennials and Generation "Z" from the Church. In some areas the non-affiliated outnumber the affiliated, with the Catholic Church suffering the greatest hemorrhage. Various factors are advanced for this exodus beyond the sexual abuse debacle. What are some of these factors which we encounter in pastoral ministry? How do we, as disciples of the Lord and as ministers of the Church, address them?

## **Challenges and Responses**

One is the breakdown of the family which no longer functions as a domestic church, a harbor of love and security where the faith is transmitted and virtues are taught.

Clearly you are called to preach and teach about marriage but also to bear witness to the true nature of marriage and family in your own lives, by your readiness to live your dual vocations with all the challenges that entails. Another is the general breakdown in personal relationships. Paradoxically, the more we become connected electronically, the more isolated we become personally. It is challenging to speak of having a personal relationship with Christ or the real and intensely personal presence of Christ in the Eucharist when many of those we address are in unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships. Often we have to model what healthy relationships are about and we have to offer opportunities for those we serve to discover, deep within, that desire for authentic love without which we cannot love. As St. John Paul II so memorably said: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being incomprehensible to himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it" (RH, 10).

There are intellectual questions that must be addressed. C.S. Lewis wisely said that the apologist must precede the evangelist, that is to say, if we would plant the seed of faith or revive it, we must be willing to deal with people's questions and objections. We sometimes assume that millennials and others are not interested in the content of the faith and in how that squares with their world view. But studies show they have many questions about faith and science about faith and technology, about the Church's stances on human rights, about the role of the Church in history, especially in Western civilization. St. Peter advises us 'to be ready to give an accounting of our hope' and that means a readiness to address the reasonableness of the faith and the authentic truth and goodness of the Christian mystery.

Then, there is the apparent meaninglessness of suffering. For many people, suffering is evidence that God does not exist, or, if he does exist, God must indeed be a cruel and heartless god. We have only to think of the mass starvation and senseless violence that is rampant in so many parts of the world, but then again, the evidence is much closer to home in the violence on our streets, in the third-world poverty in which so many of our people live, in the grief of parents who lose their children to illness and in the grief of children who lose their parents far too soon. How many times we've heard the anguished question, "Why?" And haven't there been times in our own lives when we've asked the same question? We, after all, are not made of

stone but flesh and blood capable of being wounded. We are not immune from the suffering of those to whom we minister, so what is it from our experience that we bring, in God's grace, to the suffering people whom we encounter and accompany in the course of ministry? Is it not a deep sense of participating in the passion and death of Christ? Your ministry brings you close to the mystery of the Pasch represented on the altar, not just physically but also spiritually, and not only for your own spiritual benefit but for the benefit of the suffering people to whom you are called to minister. We may well have the same 'joy and hope, grief and anguish' as our people but in God's grace, the grace of the Holy Spirit, and through a well-developed life of prayer and discernment, all the sufferings of life become a crucible in which we are formed in Christ's image. This is not merely a matter of words. This is a witness that must be given and without it pastoral ministry inevitably falls flat.

Not everyone departs for the Sahara desert of secularism. Some find their way into other churches, especially non-denominational churches, where there is no set doctrine, warm preaching, abundant fellowship, and a generally caring spirit in and among younger, vibrant congregations. There is a lot to learn from these churches – not the absence of set doctrine but a loving fidelity to the truth, a way of preaching that connects faith and life, deep pastoral charity, a joy that is infectious, hands-on charity for the poor and vulnerable, inspiring a spirit of charity and charitable service among God's people.

## **Other Considerations**

Let me suggest some other considerations as food for thought and prayer. Earlier I mentioned the penchant for discouragement and ennui that can overtake us in this wintry season in the Church's life. There can be a sense of defeatism that runs something like this: the Church is in crisis, people are mad, they're not giving, this is worse than I thought. There is no sense trying to evangelize in this atmosphere. We feel humiliated, like the Greek mythological character, Sisyphus, the once powerful king who was punished by being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to have it roll down when it nears the top... and to do this over and over and over again. It's like everything we've worked for in the course of our ministry has crumbled.

An understandable sentiment when you see that person whom you baptized or that family whom you helped or that young person who seemed so open to faith – walk away in disgust and vow never, never to return – or, as is more likely – quietly depart and become inaccessible to you or anyone else representing the Church. We can feel as though we spent our strength uselessly and in vain, thus the feelings of discouragement can set in and take hold of us. Let us remember one thing: discouragement is not a gift of the Holy Spirit. You can search the list of the gifts of the Spirit and discouragement is not there. Rather, what you do find is courage, which is not mere bravery in time of danger, but indeed an indomitable spirit in time of trouble, coupled with a trust in God, for whom nothing, nothing at all, is impossible.

Then there is the temptation to see everything through the lens of crisis. In your professional life or somewhere in your extended family, I'm sure you've encountered that person for whom the sky is always falling, and the least problem becomes an insurmountable problem. Ministry brings us face to face with all kinds of challenges, big and small, and in my own life I am always surprised by how easily small challenges are blown up into big challenges or how easily small challenges becoming stumbling blocks. On the other hand, the sexual abuse crisis in the Church is huge, it often feels as though it is insurmountable, there is no justification for minimizing it, and it requires not only our prayers but our time, attention, and effective action, relentlessly taken. But the crisis is not the sum total of the Church's life. The evil one has a way of making it seem so, of paralyzing us, and blinding us, making us unable or unwilling to see the good that is all around us.

One of the things I discover so often is how little people know about the Church, not only the Church universal but about the local Church of which we are a part. People tend to identify the Archdiocese as an administrative unit or they identify it with its administrative headquarters, the fabled 320, but have no real idea of the immense good, the Catholic impact of the Church in the City of Baltimore and in the nine counties of Maryland of which we're comprised... the immense amount of charitable work and social services, the effectiveness of our inner-city schools, our 53 seminarians, the quiet witness of so many holy women and men in our midst. If our eyes of faith are open to the Lord, so too they should be open to his works which are all around us, the fruit of his Holy Spirit at work in our midst, and these are stories

that are meant to be told and shared, not merely to make us feel better about the Church and surely not to distract us from the Church's problems, but rather to lend encouragement to those who are struggling, the encouragement that comes from Christian witness and good example.

Then, apropos of today's reading from Ephesians, we need to ask ourselves if we are a source of unity or a point of division in our parishes or the wider Church. You recall that Paul urged us to live our callings "with humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace, one body and one spirit..." (Eph. 4:3). It is distressing when those in the Church speak with the same kind of acrimony and divisiveness prevalent in society. It is distressing when those in the Church grandstand or act as lone rangers rather than placing themselves as the service of the communion of life and love, the Trinitarian communion of life and love that is the Church. Take, for example, the pastoral planning process which is now underway. It lists six pastoral priorities, key mission areas, that are utterly basic to Church, and which every parish is called to reflect on with honesty. You can play a most helpful role in those discussions, not by advancing pet projects or ideological considerations but rather by engaging in prayerful discernment with your pastors and with your co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

A few very brief considerations remain before I pause for questions. One is the importance of your bearing witness to your faith in your professional life and in the way you live your calling to marriage and family; another is the importance of hands-on service...your ministry is rooted in God's word, it is visible in your service at the altar and in the Church's sacramental life, but its chief characteristic is charity, hands-on charity and service to the poor and in this you practice "a charity that evangelizes". Next, there is the need to go to the margins ... sometimes the margins are your own brother deacons and their families who don't participate in anything, who are all but invisible and inactive. How necessary to reach out to them and encourage them and welcome them to join in formal and informal gathers, such as Emmaus groups and the like. Then, the need for us to welcome and recruit candidates for the diaconate from the African-American community and the Hispanic community - the same is true for seminarians, and vocations is everyone's business! And finally, the need for prayer - the Liturgy of the Hours, mental prayer, Marian

devotion, frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance, praying with your wives and families, reading Scripture – developing a warm and loving relationship with the Lord – for, “unless the Lord builds the house we labor in vain who build!”

Thanks for listening! God bless you and keep you in his love!