

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Transitional Diaconate Ordination

Transitional Diaconate Ordination

Basilica of the Assumption

May 27, 2017

All dear friends, gathered for this diaconal ordination: Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes how, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles discerned that they should appoint and ordain co-workers to assist them in their ministry. In the first instance, this was a generous response to a genuine pastoral need. The Christian community, made up of Jews and Greeks, was growing rapidly. And while the Apostles must have rejoiced to see such growth, reading between the lines, we get the impression that they couldn't handle it all. In fact, the Apostles were getting complaints – something I find rather consoling! The Greek converts were complaining that their widows – who were in need of the charity of the whole community – were being neglected.

The Apostles did not tell these converts to write a report or to fend for themselves. Rather, prompted by the Spirit, they chose seven reputable men. They prayed over them and laid hands on them – or, as we would say, they “ordained” these seven men to assist them in “the daily distribution” – that is to say – in the charitable assistance the community offered to those in need.

It turns out that in prompting the Apostles to respond generously to a particular need, the Holy Spirit had something more in mind – namely – the Order of Deacons who have assisted bishops and priests down through the ages. As time went by, the “portfolio” of the Order of Deacons organically expanded. For among the first class of deacons were those who bore witness to the Word of God, especially Stephen, acclaimed as the first martyr of the Church. So, gradually, the deacon's role in proclaiming the Gospel, preaching, and assisting in the Church's sacramental life was linked to a ministry of charity.

Today, these men – Bill, John, and John – your sons, brothers, classmates and friends

- are being ordained to the Order of the Diaconate. In the footsteps of the Apostles, I shall pray over them and lay hands upon them as an effective sign by which the Holy Spirit will fashion in the depths of their hearts the image of Christ the deacon, Christ the servant of all, who came “not to be served but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). I shall ordain them to preach the Word of God, to assist at the altar of the Lord and in the Church’s sacramental life, and to engage in charitable ministry to the poor and vulnerable. This is who they will be; this is what they will do as deacons.

So, now, Bill, John, and John, so soon to be ordained - allow me to address you. You are well-versed in the Biblical roots of the Diaconate, in its development in the Tradition of the Church, and in the roles of evangelization, worship, and service you are about to assume as you make your way, God willing, toward priestly ordination. So, I will not presume to instruct you about that which you already know.

What I would like to do, however, is to reflect with you on the qualities of mind and heart which you are to bring to your three-fold ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Charity. And rather than pulling these qualities out of thin air, I will take my cue from the Opening Prayer, the Collect, of this Holy Mass. On your behalf, this is what we all prayed for, namely, that, as deacons, you would be “effective in action, gentle in ministry, and constant in prayer.” In this moment of grace and joy, let us ask what this means.

First we prayed that you will be “effective in action”, that is, “effective in ministry”. This prayer covers ground that is very familiar to you, for a large part of your priestly formation is all about your becoming an effective minister. As deacons, you will have ample opportunity to assess the progress made thus far. Thus you will strive to proclaim the Gospel effectively -not merely so that the congregation can hear and understand the words - but indeed so that the inspired meaning of the Gospel will resonate in their hearts. When you preach, you will not provide a lesson in theology or any other subject but rather open many minds and hearts to Christ and to his love and helping the people you will serve to live as his disciples in the world. When you minister at the altar or preside at baptisms, weddings, and funerals - you will be effective to the degree that you help the whole worshipping community to be drawn into the saving embrace of the Crucified and Risen Lord. In

your charitable works, you are to bear effective witness to the Gospel and touch the lives of those in need with the healing balm of God's mercy. You cannot solve every problem or address every need, but you can accompany the poor and vulnerable with a transforming love. Thus you will effectively contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ and to the strength and unity of this local Church, the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

A gruff, pompous, and self-serving deacon is, of course, a contradiction in terms, for the word, *diakonia*, has to do with gentle and generous service of others. So it is that we prayed that you would be "gentle in ministry". In so doing, we take to heart St. Paul's words in today's reading from Ephesians: "I . . . a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility, gentleness, and patience" (Eph. 4:1-2). So too in the Gospel the Lord Jesus urges you not to lord your position over others but rather to be among them as one who serves (Mt. 20:28). As you go about preaching the word, assisting in the Church's worship, and serving those who are in need – strive to imitate Christ. It is the Christ who is "meek and humble of heart" (Mt. 11:29) who invites you to share in *his* ministry. Your readiness to listen, your patience in difficult situations, your willingness to build bridges and to avoid harsh and cynical speech, your rejection of all forms of clericalism – all this and more is what it means to be gentle in ministry after the example of Christ. Let me assure you, your gentle spirit may be what will open the hearts of those who are disconnected from the Church and alienated from others.

Finally, in our opening prayer, we asked that you might be constant in prayer. St. Paul, in his 1st Letter to the Thessalonians (5:17) urges that we "pray without ceasing" and, as you recall, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus taught us by means of a parable "the necessity to pray always . . . without becoming weary" (Luke 18:1). It is not enough for a deacon or a priest to be a professional "*pray-er*" . . . someone who trots out piety for the public to see but who never prays in private. The truth is, our ministry can only be effective by prayer. After all, we are only the Lord's agents – we plant the seeds of the faith, we water them and tend them – but it is the Lord who gives the growth (cf. 1 Cor. 3:7) in answer to our prayers. When we fail to pray deeply, we therefore undercut the effectiveness of our ministry. And looking into our

hearts, we know our reservoir of patience is only so deep. Left to our own devices, soon or later, we become harsh and judgmental, not gentle. By prayer, you tap into God's infinite patience, his mercy, his gentle love. Constancy in prayer is the key to your being effective in action and gentle in ministry.

In the seminary, much attention is given to your spiritual formation. As deacons, and later, God willing, as priests, I urge to build on what you've been given. Ensure that every day includes Holy Mass, the Breviary, a Holy Hour, and the Rosary. Punctuate your day with prayer, with meditation, and with praise. It is true you are not called to a monastic form of life but you and I are called to pray constantly, so much so, that our whole life, body and soul, becomes an eternal offering to the Lord.

In this Basilica dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption and in the waning days of this month dedicated to our Lady, I entrust you to her prayers - asking her intercession - that you may always be ". . . effective in action, gentle in ministry, and constant in prayer." God bless you and keep you always in his love!