

Diaconal Enrichment Day - St. Francis of Assisi

Introduction: Choosing the Name 'Francis'

When it was learned in 2013 that the new Pope was a Jesuit and that he would be called Francis, some speculated that he wanted to honor the Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier. The Pope himself quickly made it clear that he chose the name Francis after St. Francis of Assisi, the saint whose feast day we celebrate today. He did so because he wanted to see 'a church that was for the poor.'

At a public audience, Pope Francis described how it happened. As the conclave that elected him proceeded, it was becoming clear to then-Cardinal Bergoglio that he would be elected pope. Sitting next to him was the Brazilian Cardinal, Claudio Hummes, who offered his neighbor comfort and consolation at that emotional moment. When Cardinal Bergoglio received the two-thirds majority, Cardinal Hummes hugged him and said: "Don't forget about the poor!" "And those words came to me," Pope Francis recalled, "The poor. The poor. Then right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars as the votes were being counted, until the end. Francis is also the man of peace. This is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi."

"The man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation." How providential that we are gathered for this day of enrichment on the feast day of the great Francis of Assisi. And in my homily today, I will let Pope Francis guide our thoughts on how the example of Francis of Assisi applies to your lives and ministries here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Embracing the Poor as Mediators of Light

All of us know something about the life of St. Francis of Assisi but it is good to retell the story, at least briefly. To put it briefly, Francis was born in 1182 into comfortable circumstances. His father sold "dry goods" as we used to say and was wealthy. Young Francis seemed destined to enjoy life and its much-vaunted pleasures, until, one day, a Gospel passage deeply touched his heart... the passage where Jesus sent his disciples forth on a missionary journey, instructing them to take "no sack for the

journey or a second tunic, or sandals, or a walking stick” (Mat. 10:10).

To the utter astonishment of his family and friends, the young Francis abandoned the comfortable life into which he was born. He left behind everything he had in order to become poor, like Christ, and began to bear witness to Christ on the streets of Assisi. Before long, others came to join him, soon to be known as the Friars Minor.

Pope Francis tells us, however, what really sealed Francis of Assisi’s conversion. It was the moment he embraced a leper. That leper became for Francis of Assisi “a mediator of light” (Lumen Fidei, no. 57) because in the poor, the sick, and the suffering persons that we embrace, “we embrace the suffering Body of Christ.” Indeed, the mysteries of the Kingdom of God are revealed not only to the poor and the simply but also through them...

Embracing and Accompanying

But it is not enough, Pope Francis tells us, merely to embrace the poor, not enough for us to have only a passing relationship with the poor. Rather, he says, “we must hold the hand of the one in need, of the one who has fallen into the darkness of dependency without even knowing how, and you must say to her: ‘You can get up, you can stand up. It is difficult but it is possible, if you want to.... You are never alone. The Church & so many people are close to you....’”

In describing the patron saint of his papacy, Pope Francis also shares what I take to be two pillars of his pastoral program for the evangelization of the Church throughout the world: encounter and accompaniment. Just as St. Francis of Assisi encountered the leper by embracing him, immediately conveying love and acceptance, so too we are never to treat those to whom we minister impersonally. We must try to know those we serve and we must leave the door wide open so that they will want to talk with us, not merely about trivial things but about what really matters in their lives. Pope Francis makes it clear, as did Blessed Mother Teresa, that our openness must include both the materially and spiritually poor, those who are sick, suffering, and otherwise so very vulnerable, as well as those who live in spiritual poverty because they are estranged from God.

But the moment of encounter is only the beginning. Pope Francis tells us and our co-workers in the vineyard, that we must accompany those we have encountered, help

them along the way to encounter the Person of Christ, to experience the greatness of his love and mercy, and to receive the transforming power of his grace in the company of the Church. Once they arise and are standing, they too can be the Lord's witnesses. Accompanying people on their spiritual journey is time-consuming and exhausting. It does not always lead to success and there is always the temptation to seek an easy way out. Pope Francis and Francis of Assisi would urge us not to do so.

Representing the Church

As you know so well, the diaconal ministry has three pillars: Word, Altar, and Service to the Poor. St. John Paul II famously said that the diaconate represents "the Church's service "sacramentalized" and the National Directory on the Diaconate goes on to say: "Therefore, the deacon's service in the Church's ministry of word and liturgy would be severely deficient if his exemplary witness and assistance in the Church's ministry of charity and justice did not accompany it." Again and again we are reminded that all three components of diaconal ministry are interrelated and co-joined, a mirror image of the Church herself.

As the Archdiocese of Baltimore celebrates its 225th anniversary, we do well to note that we were one of the first dioceses to embrace the restoration of the diaconate after the II Vatican Council and we do well to celebrate those pioneering deacons, their wives, & their families. It is a moment for me to thank all of you for your ministry in our midst. This anniversary is also a time for us to embrace anew the mission of evangelization that has been entrusted to this Premier See, and that mission must necessarily include the proclamation of the Gospel by service to the poor, the needy, and the vulnerable and by working to create a more just and compassionate society.

As deacons, together with your wives and families, you are called to engage in ministries that enable you to embrace the poor and to accompany them on their journey to Christ, knowing that your own journey is guided and hastened in the process. You are called to exemplify in your own lives the freedom of a St. Francis of Assisi who, unencumbered by attachment to possessions, bore witness to Christ in ways that still captivate the heart of the world. May he pray for you and may his example guide you in your ministry.