

Diaconal Enrichment Day

A word of thanks to Msgr. Hannon the team of deacons who worked so hard to organize this day of enrichment for their brother deacons and their wives. Our warmest thanks as well to Msgr. Luca and his staff here at St. Louis Parish who have welcomed us all so warmly.

And it's good that we're here, in a place apart from our daily routine, to renew friendships, to relax, but also focus on what really matters in our lives as deacons and spouses. And I'm glad to be here with you this morning to share a few thoughts and a bit of conversation following my remarks.

Last year when we gathered in Convocation, I had been here just about a year and had just dipped my big toe in the swimming pool. Now, I guess you could say, I'm in the deep end of the pool. And thus far my head is above water! Thanks for your support, friendship, and encouragement. My experience is that we are an Archdiocese with a heart, an Archdiocesan family of faith with a good and generous heart, and the deacons and diaconal families of the Archdiocese contribute to the warmth and vitality of this local church, this family of faith. Like every family, we have our problems - who doesn't - but we can address them much better when we care for one another and desire one another to succeed in the way that the Gospel defines success...viz., the Beatitudes!

Let me offer a few words and then open up to questions and comments, and the focus of my comments is the mission the Lord gave you and me on that day when he ascended into heaven... "Go, therefore..."

Now let me ask, in your diaconal formation, did any of you ever take a course in missiology...the theology of mission? I don't ask that question to criticize but rather to make an admission. I didn't have such a course either in the seminary. If I remember correctly it was part of the ecclesiology course I took but to tell you truth, back in the day, I thought of it as interesting and important but not particularly relevant to what I thought I'd be doing the rest of my life. Late at night the saintly Bishop Walsh of Maryknoll and Cumberland visits me and rebukes me for imaging that all the missions are overseas!

In 1977, when I was newly ordained and serving as Assistant Pastor of St. Joseph's in Landover, Pope Paul VI's document "On the Evangelization of the Modern World" was still relatively new, two or three years old. Cardinal Baum and Bishop Marino came to the parish which hosted a conference on evangelization... but before the conference began we had dinner in the Rectory. (It was November and the Pastor had not yet turned the heat on). In his own unique way, the Pastor pressed the two prelates on exactly what this new thing called evangelization might be. If it was not apologetics or catechesis, what was this strange thing called 'evangelization'? Conversant as both prelates were with Pope Paul's visionary document, I'm afraid they didn't make much of a sale that night at our dinner table but at least it got me thinking, and when Cardinal Baum told the Pastor I looked blue (he was bluer) the heat did get turned on!

As years went on, the terminology shifted from evangelization, to re-evangelization, to the new evangelization. To some extent, it was the events that rocked the church over these past decades that prompted many put the church's mission in sharper focus: the mere fact that many people stopped going to church or stopped trusting the church in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis. In the late 90's I was standing in the back of St. Joseph's Church on Capitol Hill, getting ready to do a confirmation...and a man came up to me, obviously agitated, because he had read in Our Sunday Visitor that only about 25% of American Catholics were going to Mass each week. "Bishop," he said, "If you worked for Board of Directors you'd be fired!" And when Mass was over he told me my singing was, and I quote, "pitiful". I went home and ate potato chips, a lot of them, while watching the 10 PM news.

Somewhere along the way, though, it dawned on me that the apostles didn't undertake their mission because they were afraid or because they were responding to heavy criticism. They went forth because the Holy Spirit opened their hearts to Christ such that his transforming love took possession of their inmost selves, such that they could not have kept silent about the Gospel, even if they wanted to! And out they went, to the ends of the earth. It's true to say they didn't count the cost and went where the Spirit led them, but the Acts of the Apostles also makes they didn't go out helter-skelter. They knew what they were doing.

A few nights ago, I went with a group of bishops to visit the new St. John Paul II

Shrine in Washington, which is being completely re-envisioned and redone by the Knights of Columbus. Already finished is the permanent exhibit of John Paul II's life which combines the chronology of his life with the themes of his teaching. Historians will debate aspects of his papacy for years to come but there's no denying his great heart, his magnanimity, his vision, especially regarding the dignity of the human person. Without a great heart, the small stuff gets us down and gets in the way of the essential mission we've been entrusted with.

Pope Francis has taken what popes have been saying for years and put it in direct language combined with obvious pastoral love. I was really surprised and delighted that the "Francis Factor" program at Loyola attracted so many people. The Pope is intent on refocusing the whole church on evangelization. He's looking for "missionary disciples" (you, me, and our people) and his looking for institutions (dioceses, parishes, schools, charities) that are not self-absorbed in their own problems but outward looking... absorbed in the mission of bringing the Gospel where it is the most absent. He's calling us and our people to infuse our parishes and institutions of service with the spirit of the Gospel, with a sense of mission, with a readiness to proclaim Jesus with simplicity and love. He is also banking on the fact that when people encounter Christ they will be much more open to what the Church believes and teaches. When you teach someone to drive, you don't begin on a hairpin turn. No, you begin to familiarize them with the car, the vehicle, and with the basic rules of the road. So too, Jesus is the way, the truth, and life!

When I came here, we were on the verge of closing parishes. Someone, well-meaning, said, "You've got too many stores." I felt like I had been put in charge of Radio Shack or Sears. I think we all know we have difficult work ahead of us and perhaps some think I've put things off... But I really want to make sure that, to the extent possible, we are united in doing the hard work of right-sizing on the only correct basis for any major decision in the life of the Church - viz., the mission of evangelization.

Of course, it has to be sustainable, not only in terms of clergy and staff but also able to offer programs that reach out into the community and invites them to encounter Christ. It requires that we develop a mission-minded culture in the Archdiocese, not just at 320 but in every parish and institution and mainly among ourselves. This

preparatory work is not window dressing but the real-deal. It's this upon which we'll be judged in the final round-up! And it is something we have to continue working hard to instill in the people we serve, especially our staffs & lay leadership.

So the first and most important question is: What must we do for the sake of mission? And the second is like it: Not whether we shall be present but how we shall be present such that every area and neighborhood of the Archdiocese is evangelized. Let me comment on both questions. All around the country parishes are being merged and/or closed/or reconfigured. No matter what name you put on it, it's a difficult process for all concerned but that process must be seen in terms of mission. If you are old enough, you might remember two once-great automobile firms, viz., Packard and Studebaker. They merged in the 1950's when both firms were greatly weakened and by the mid-1960's both marques had disappeared. If we follow merely a bottom-line strategy in parish mergers, we'll probably end up not too much different from those storied car manufacturers.

So the first question is what does the mission require? It's almost inevitable that parishes will attract parishioners from other zip codes, indeed, some parishes in the Archdiocese are 'destination parishes' - and, in the words of Walter Cronkite, "That's the way it is!" But what about the particular zip code where any given parish exists? What about the people in the local neighborhoods? What about the people nearby who have left the Church, who have been hurt by the Church or who have drifted away? What are the pastoral needs? The human and social needs? When the Pope talks about acquiring 'the smell of the sheep' - he doesn't mean mingling from time to time with the hoi polloi! He means really knowing who's who and what's what in the neighborhoods that comprise our parishes. And the byword of your diaconal ministries, therefore, should be 'outreach' - a persistent desire to reach out and to find out what is needed - what the mission of evangelization really requires of us.

The second question is not whether but how we'll be present. And here too you have a big role to play. It may not be a beacon of hope to have a parish just eking by in a neighborhood with boarded up row houses and kids on the streets with nowhere to go, no family structure, no schooling, and the like. Should not our pastoral footprint then be rather like the three components of the diaconal ministry: a vibrant and

sustainable church community where the Gospel is proclaimed and where opportunities for education, formation, & remediation are available; a vibrant sacramental church that is present to people at all stages of life; and a church that reaches out providing services – healthcare, charities and social services, head-start, pre-K, after school, & the like? In other words, wrap-around services. Let me add, that evangelization travels by way of the family. The family is not merely the object of evangelization (i.e., ‘we have to do something for our families – but what?’) – no we have form families so that within the family circle the faith can be transmitted & young people can find their dignity & vocation.

Digging a bit deeper into the biblical roots of the diaconate, it seems to me that word & sacrament lead to its most distinctive feature, viz., charity, that is, a charity that evangelizes. And as Pope Benedict noted, it is the witness of charity that most often brings people to Christ and to the Church. I hope that during your discussions you will focus on this aspect of your ministry and see it as integral to the Church’s overall mission of evangelization, as we begin our next 225 years. Thank you for your presence here this morning, thanks for listening, God bless you and keep you always in His love!