

Homily for Ordination of Deacons
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St. Joan of Arc Church
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“It is I, be not afraid,” says the Lord to us all. “The joy of the resurrection renews the whole world.” How fitting it is that in this season of Easter joy, La Pascua Florida, the seminary community of St. Vincent de Paul presents these candidates to be ordained deacons for the State of Florida. In listening to St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, one experiences such a passion for ministry: “woe to me, if I do not preach the Gospel. I have made myself a slave to all; I have become all things to all.” The reason behind this passion for ministry is found in what happened to Paul on his way to Damascus: the encounter with the risen Lord that transformed his life forever. The apostle of the Gentiles always rooted his ministry in the personal experience of the risen Lord. It is very appropriate that in the Easter season of joy our men that have encountered the living Christ are today ordained as celibate men for the kingdom, as servants of Christ for all people.

Christ is the servant, he is the “Kyrius”, the Lord of glory who washes the feet of his own. He is a servant who has not come to be served but to serve and give his life for all. Precisely last Saturday Pope Francis “the servant of the servants of God” announced a Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus*, and Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. The compassion of Christ is affirmed as Pope Francis says: “His person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously. The relationships he forms with the people who approach him manifest into something entirely unique and unrepeatable. The sign he works especially in the face of sinner, the poor, the marginalized, the sick and the suffering are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy, nothing in him is devoid of compassion. Jesus read the hearts of those he encountered and responded to their deepest need. The calling of Matthew is also presented within the context of mercy. Passing by the tax collector’s booth Jesus looked intently at Matthew; it was a look of mercy that forgave the sins of that man, a sinner and tax collector, whom Jesus chose against the hesitation of the disciples to become one of the twelve.”

I give thanks that these our brothers and friends listened to the voice of Christ whispering within the best of themselves: (Christ saying): will you allow me to live my servant mysteries over again in your own flesh? The rest is history...for indeed you did say yes, fiat in continuity with Mary of the Annunciation. Let it be done. She said. Let it be done, you said. When St. Augustine thought of himself in his office, he often spoke of himself as a servant, a slave. He said that he wished not so much to be in charge as to be a help. He wanted to be a servant of Christ and through him a servant of his servants. (Epistle 217,1).

The transitional deacons could be tempted to see this ordination simply as a passage to their true vocation as all these candidates aspire to become priests. Some may rejoice in this ordination as a stepping stone of their true identity that is getting closer to becoming a priest. And one could understand that because as St. Augustine said: “in this life and especially in these times there is nothing more taxing, more arduous but at the same time no greater happiness in the eyes of God

than the office of a priest.” (Letter 21, 40) It is opportune for us to listen to what Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said to the clergy of Rome on February 7, 2008, “Every priest, of course, also continues as a deacon and must always be aware of this dimension, for the Lord himself became our minister, our deacon. Recall the act of washing of the feet where it is explicitly shown that the teacher, the Lord, acts as a deacon and wants those who follow him to be deacons and carry out this ministry of humanity to the point that they even help us wash the dirty feet of those entrusted to our care. This dimension seems to be of paramount importance.”

The ministry of a deacon is so prophetic to our dominant culture because the deacon brings a permanent vulnerability to the servant mysteries of Christ. In fact, it was said of Jesus, as one who was present among the people, as one who served. (Luke 22, 27).

As Deacons, first of all, you will serve by being vulnerable to receive grace, the divine intimacy in your hearts so that from that intimacy you reveal the humble, servant Christ to others. The deacon is able to give himself **in** Christ’s own self gift. Deacon Jim Keating says in his unpublished book *The Heart of the Diaconate* that “as the Lord shapes the deacon at ordination he descends, he shapes also the culture through the diaconal ministry. In this way Christ continues to wait on the tables of human need through the deacons’ receptivity to flesh out Christ own life, death and resurrection. “

The deacon does not receive a power of his own at ordination but he does possess a share in the mission of Christ who is sent as a servant who chooses to love those in need with unusual tenderness, gentleness and respect. His union with Christ enables him to do all things through him who strengthens the servant minister. (Philippians 12, 14).

The deacon witnesses the poverty of Christ because the deacon participates in the self-emptying of Christ which enables him to say authentically with St. Paul “the other is more important than me”. The service of the deacon is thus marked by humility and self-effacement. That is why he witnesses poverty as total dependence on the grace of ordination... on that communion with the servant mysteries of Christ which constitutes his identity. Holy Mother Church stated it succinctly: “the primary and most fundamental relationship of the deacon is with Christ who assumed the condition of a slave for the love of the Father of mankind. In virtue of ordination the deacon is truly called to act in conformity with Christ the servant.” *Directory for the Ministry and Life of the Permanent Deacons*, # 47.

Only through prayer can the deacon be ready to be empty of self-concerns, of a given agenda, of preoccupation over his status and place. The deacon is a spiritual leader because he is grounded in the Gospel poverty of spirit. From today on, the elect consecrate their bodies to Christ the Lord in witnessing celibacy for the kingdom. Only the person of Christ can fulfill all the desires of the person. Saint John Paul II in talking about St. Joseph said: “Joseph in obedience to the Spirit found in the Spirit the source of love, the conjugal love which he experienced as a man and this love proved to be greater than this just man could ever have expected within the limits of his human heart”. John Paul II, *Custodian of the Redeemer*, # 19. Christ, in choosing you, has in fact chosen your own body, within your chaste body he wishes to live over his own servant mysteries. As a Deacon elect wrote in a song, “*I can’t Help it*”: *take my whole life I am falling in love with you. Take my hand take my whole life too. I can’t help but falling in love with you.* In listening to his song, I found a manly struggle leading to submission of his heart. This living over again is not simply the result of being baptized, this new sacrament of holy orders seals you to be his property-you are His! ...”this configuring to Christ’s own servant identity is so distinct that it

is a new sacrament beside baptism.” J. Keating, p.25. Jesus, who defines himself as “I am among you as one who serves” is indeed still among us in the form of the diaconate charism to provide all the possibilities of caring with merciful love for the immense needs of suffering humanity scattered in the peripheries, both in culture and geography.

In this intimate participation in Christ’s own servant mysteries our deacons witness that it is possible to be fully fulfilled in selfless love for others as true Eucharistic men. It is my prayer that each of the deacons ordained today here at St. Joan of Arc, may be able to say like St. Paul: “I became a slave to all to win souls for Christ so that I too share in the joy of Gospel”.

Love is ingenious and the deacon is an expert in finding new human needs at times even unidentified in society. There are too many in society asking for personal care and love. To respond well, the servant needs adaptability, flexibility, and creativity to be all to all while keeping balance and wholeness. This servant culture is enhanced in an openness to learn languages and new cultures by moving away from fear and timidity in order to reach out to those situations and places that one normally would not find necessarily comfortable ...I mean situations such as prisons, hospitals, food pantries, inner cities, senior citizen homes, bus stations... All of this service is to be done out of the passion to witness Christ’s merciful love. As Pope Francis, in his calling forth the Jubilee Year of Mercy, stated: “how many uncertain and painful situations in the world today, how many of the wounds born by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich. During this jubilee the Church will be called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care. Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new. Let us ward off destructive cynicism, let us open our eyes and see the mystery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help. May we reach out to them and support them, so they can feel the warmth of our presences, our friendship and our fraternity. May their cry become our own and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism.”

How timely, dear brothers, how timely are these prophetic and challenging ideas, and how opportune it is to become a deacon in the extraordinary jubilee of mercy. As Christian people engage in the corporal and spiritual deeds of mercy, the Jubilee will motivate us according to Pope Francis’ own words: “to wake up our conscience that often grows dull in the face of poverty and let us enter more deeply into heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy. “

The cover art work of this ordination program shows the Lord washing the feet of his disciples. This motif fits perfectly to express the identity of the diaconate order. It also expresses the priesthood, the Supper which is the anticipation of the sacrifice of the Lord of glory who freely and willingly lays down his life for his friends and glorifies the eternal Father. If you look at this art work, the apostle that is being washed by the Lord shows an expression of amazement as if he were saying, this is incredible, this is awesome, and yes, it is amazing that the Kyrius becomes our servant on the floor, that the king of glory is the one “who loves us to the extreme.” (Jo. 13, 1).

We cannot but turn now our attention to Mother Mary, Mother of the Church. We are in such need of her intercession, her protection over the new deacons, as one of the deacons elect sang, *“in spite of our weakness, you are mother of the beautiful love...mother of God’s only Son”* pray for each these thirteen brothers, servants of the Lord. Remember oh most gracious Virgin Mary, *mother of the beautiful love*, inspired by our trust to you, these deacons elect stand before you, sinful and sorrowful, in your mercy lead them always to your Son, the Word made flesh in your womb. Amen