

Easter 4b: Good Shepherd Sunday

Admission of Candidates for the Permanent Diaconate

St. Mark's

21 April 2018

Dear brother priests and deacons; dear aspirants, soon-to-be candidates for the diaconate, together with your wives and families; and a special welcome to inquirers; dear parishioners and friends in Christ:

Introduction

First, a word of gratitude to the Lord for having brought us all to this day. It is certainly the fruit of much prayer, soul-searching and effort on the part of the aspirants gathered here this evening. Certainly I wish to thank you, together with your wives and families, for responding so generously to the Lord's gentle but insistent call. He has beckoned you, just as he did the first disciples on the shore of the Lake of Galilee: men who were busy washing their nets, going about the routine of daily life, earning a living for their families (cf. Lk 5:1-2). And then came a surprise and change of direction.

Dear aspirants: for some time now, as you have been discerning the call to serve the Church as deacons, the Lord has entered your lives in a new and powerful way. But you have not been alone in this adventure of grace. From the outset, you have been guided on your journey. You have been assisted by your very able and dedicated Director, Monsignor Gregory Smith; by the wise members of the Advisory Committee; by your teachers, and by the priests who have

been at your side in this walk. I am grateful, very grateful indeed, to your wonderful mentors and guides.

Lastly, I give thanks to the families and particularly to you, dear wives of these men who are to be admitted to candidacy. In so many respects, you have played and will continue to play an integral role in their spiritual journey. Your willingness to encourage them to open their hearts to the call of the Lord, your selfless love, your support amid their struggles to discern their place in the Lord's plan, and your fidelity in prayer are a blessing not only to your husbands but to the Church of Vancouver and above all to the lives of all those who will be touched by their ministry of service. Thank you for offering your continued support in the demanding years ahead of their theological and pastoral formation.

My brothers, the Church understands that no one enters into ordained service who has not first been first called by God, and then chosen and sent by the Church through the Bishop. The ministry of the diaconate is not like the career which you chose for yourself. It is a response to a divine call and a grace to which you must strive to be faithful. That's why the ecclesial community determines your aptitude for this ministry. You are about to become candidates for the diaconate because others have prudentially judged that, as far as they can determine at this point, you seem to possess the qualities necessary to

embrace the unique role of service entrusted to ordained deacons in the Church.

With this formal recognition of your candidacy, you enter into a new and deeper phase of formation to prepare you for the seal of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

While all of us as baptized followers of the Lord Jesus are called to embrace his friendship and to make his example of selfless love the pattern for our own lives, as those preparing for ordination to the diaconate, this decision has consequences for your lives in a unique manner today. Your openness to the call to serve the Church demands a letting go of your own ego, needs, interests and control in order to imitate Jesus.

My brothers, as you move forward in your formation, hold within your hearts the example of Our Lord, who came “not to be served but to serve,” and to give his life for the sake of the many.

Reflect often on the nature of the service rooted in your call. A deacon’s service to the People of God is threefold: service to the Word of God, service at the altar of the Lord, and service to the poor. All three kinds of service are essential to the Church’s life.

Good Shepherd

Today the Church celebrates Christ, our Good Shepherd. In the Gospel from John Jesus tells us who he is – the Good Shepherd and who

we are – the sheep of *his* flock.

There is a long tradition, coming from the Church's earliest days, which interprets the Gospel of the Good Shepherd in light of the mystery of Christ and the Church. We are, each one of us, like sheep lost in the desert and exposed to predators. We have lost our way, but not our Shepherd. After the Fall of Adam and Eve, sin took charge of the world, and nothing could stop its relentless march. But then something wonderful happened. God, in his infinite mercy, personally intervened. This is what Benedict XVI wrote about how God provided a way out:

The Son of God will not let this happen; he cannot abandon humanity in so wretched a condition. He leaps to his feet and abandons the glory of heaven, in order to go in search of the sheep and pursue it, all the way to the Cross. He takes it upon his shoulders and carries our humanity; he carries us all – he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.¹

And so, whenever else Jesus is telling us in this discourse on shepherds, he is telling us this. No matter what desert we find ourselves in, and their number is countless – the deserts of loneliness, unrequited love, hardness of heart, abandonment and every kind of suffering – we

¹ Benedict XVI, Homily for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

are not like sheep without a shepherd. We have not been left alone. He knows us by name: “I know my own and my own know me” (Jn 10:14). What is so marvellous, almost unimaginable, is that God himself goes in search of us “stray sheep,” a suffering, helpless and confused humanity, chasing after us. The whole story of salvation is less about our search for God, which can be lukewarm, than it is about his search for us.

While Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we cannot forget that John identified him as the “Lamb of God”: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn 1:29) – a title we still give him before reception of Holy Communion: “This is the Lamb of God . . . This is the Good Shepherd who takes away the sins of the world.” The Shepherd of all humanity himself became a Lamb. He stood on the side of the lambs, on our side, with those who are downtrodden. This is how he most perfectly revealed himself to be the true Shepherd: “I am the Good Shepherd . . . I lay down my life for the sheep,” Jesus says of himself (Jn 10:14-15).

The sign of the Shepherd’s care is not his power but his compassion and mercy, his willingness to lay down his life for the sheep. The mystery of the Cross is at the centre of Jesus’ service as a Shepherd: it is the great service that he renders to all of us.

Conclusion

With confidence that the Good Shepherd is calling these aspirants

to be candidates for the diaconate we now proceed with the Rite the Church has given us. It begins with an exhortation.

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