

Saturday, May 18, 2013
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament
Ordination of Deacons
Homily

There is a story about a group of pastors from Eastern Europe who came to Massachusetts for a religious conference. They were all staying at a retreat house. At the end of the first day of the conference, some of these guests put their shoes outside the door of their room before going to bed.

A couple of monks were walking down the hallway late in the evening after night prayer and they saw the shoes. They mentioned it to their superior that it seemed odd that the shoes would be left in the hall.

That superior was an immigrant from Eastern Europe, so he immediately understood the reason. He explained to the two monks that it was a custom in some parts of Europe that guests would leave their shoes outside their doors to be cleaned and polished.

It was understood that providing such service was an expression of hospitality. It was understood that servants of the house would take care of it.

When the superior finished explaining the presence of the shoes in the hallway, the two monks simply shrugged their shoulders and went off to their rooms to sleep. The superior went down the hall, gathered the shoes and spent most of the night cleaning the mud from the shoes and polishing them for each of the guests.

When morning came for the first session of the conference, it was the superior who gave the first presentation. Later during a coffee-break, the two monks who had first seen the shoes outside the doors heard some of the guests commenting on how nice they had been treated, including the care for their shoes.

That night, the same two monks were returning from the chapel after night prayer and they saw more dirty shoes outside the doors of some of the guest rooms. As they went along, they picked up the shoes and cleaned and polished them without saying anything to their superior.

In that story it says that it was expected that the servants of the house would take care of cleaning the shoes of any guests staying in that place. In our culture, many of us might not understand this example of hospitality. Some might even reject it, because it represents the feeling that many people have of being entitled to being served by others without giving any consideration for what they can and should do for themselves.

Today, in this celebration of the sacrament of Holy Orders, Sam Alberano, Jr. and Gary Gill are ordained deacons. They are ordained for a life of service. The word deacon comes from the Greek word *diakonia*, which means service.

We hear about such service in the readings from Sacred Scripture for today's liturgy. In the Book of Numbers we heard about the Levites who were designated for service in caring for the sanctuary.

These Levites were originally public slaves and foreigners who probably did not provide that service on a voluntary basis. But their service was necessary for the sake of public worship.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about the selection and ordination of the first deacons whose service was needed so that the apostles and presbyters could carry out their duties of preaching and presiding at prayer. The deacons' service was needed to take care of widows and those who were neglected in their physical needs of food and clothing.

So the first deacons of the Church were responsible not so much for service at the Table of the Lord, but for service of waiting on the common tables of the Christian community.

Sam and Gary are being ordained for service today, but what is the service, the *diakonia*, that they are to provide? It may not be cleaning shoes, or taking care of the sanctuary, or waiting on tables, but there are three parts to the ministry of a deacon.

First, there is the ministry of the Word. Sam and Gary have already been formally installed in the ministry of Lector. But with the sacrament of Holy Orders, you are also authorized to preach the word of God, even at times

during liturgical celebrations when the Church is gathered for Divine Worship.

Next, there is the ministry at the Table of the Lord. There Sam and Gary assist the priest or bishop in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In some instances you will actually officiate at Weddings or confer the sacrament of Baptism. These sacramental celebrations are part of the liturgical life of the Church and are acts of Divine Worship through which the saving mystery of Christ Jesus is made manifest.

Third, is the ministry of Service. It is rooted in the tradition and example of the first deacons we heard about in the Acts of the Apostles. Sam and Gary, you must always be aware of the needs of the poor; those who are neglected. In the name of Christ's Church, you are to minister to the hungry, the homeless, the grieving, the sick, and the imprisoned.

Sam and Gary, there are three parts to your ministry but it is only one ministry that you assume. Please do not compartmentalize your ministry into conflicting models or gravitate only to that part of your three-fold ministry that you find most rewarding.

The ministry of the Word and ministry at the Altar in no way conflict with the ministry of Service. On the contrary, the Word proclaimed and the mysteries celebrated oblige us to love one another and to be of service to the poor.

You must show how the three essential elements of the Church's life – Word, Worship and Service, presuppose one another and are inseparable. And remember also that a deacon's ministry is not fully diaconal and not truly unified if he is only a servant of the Word or the Altar, but does not serve the poor directly.

And we all know that the poor are present in all of those opportunities we have to practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

If you are looking for an inspiring contemporary model of diaconal ministry, look no farther than the person of our new Holy Father, Pope Francis.

His preaching is simple, but profound. Pope Francis revealed that when it was known that enough votes were made to elect him, one of the older Cardinals whispered to him, “Do not forget the poor.”

And since that day, Pope Francis has been reminding all of us

- not to forget the poor;
- not to forget that service to the poor, materially and spiritually, is an essential part of the mission of the Church.

And Pope Francis has reminded us that going out in service to others is so important because if the Church is closed in on itself and is not serving others, it is not the authentic Church intended by Christ.

We have all seen and heard in just a short time that Pope Francis practiced this commitment to service when he was Archbishop in Argentina, and he has continued to show signs of practicing what he preaches now that he is the Pope:

- we see it in his own simple lifestyle, and
- we see it in his own ministry at the altar, especially on Holy Thursday when he decided not to celebrate Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica, but instead he celebrated Mass in a prison for young adults. During that Mass he washed and kissed the feet of prisoners, men and women, including a woman of Muslim faith.

This service of Pope Francis reminded me of the service of the religious superior who recognized the dirty shoes of the guests in his monastery and who responded by cleaning and polishing them.

The washing of feet by Pope Francis is also a good reminder that what we do in service at the Altar must relate to our service to the poor and what we do in our service to the poor must relate to our relationship with Christ in the sacred mysteries, especially in the sacred mysteries of his passion, death, and resurrection that we celebrate in the Holy Eucharist.

Anyone of us may feel overwhelmed if we pay attention to the needs of others around us. Pope Francis reminds us what Christ teaches us in the Gospel today.

Even if we see these responsibilities as burdens, we are reminded that they are burdens of love. Jesus reminds us that we are to keep God's commandments.

And Christ reminds us that if we keep his commandments we remain in his love; we remain in the love that he has for us and the love that he wants us to share in service to others.

Sam and Gary, do not be afraid of the responsibilities that are being placed on you today. Embrace them with joy and know that the Lord Jesus walks with you every step of the way.

Bring to him your sorrows, challenges and misunderstandings. Those things are bound to happen; we all experience them. So Jesus says in the Gospel, not to be afraid, or worried, or discouraged. He says, "Whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you."

Jesus Christ our Savior reminds you in the Gospel today that you are not slaves. You are his disciples and you are his friends. So stay close to him. Follow him in prayer. Follow Jesus' example.

Just as he himself has done, you also should do. Do God's will from the heart. And serve God's people in love and joy as you would the Lord himself.

Knowing all of that, Jesus Christ says that he has appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, and that fruit will remain if your life and ministry remain in Christ's love.

Sam and Gary, be patient, be selfless, and be generous. Allow Jesus Christ to be seen and heard in your life and ministry as deacons. He loves you and is always there to help you. Never stop praying and asking his help. Be thankful and continue to be filled with the joy that you have in your hearts today.

As Pope Francis reminds us, we are nothing, but Christ is everything. The Lord Jesus is the highest standard of being a deacon. He came not to be served, but to serve. And he came to show us how and why we should do it; so that God's love may be known by everyone.