

**Homily for Mass with Permanent Deacon Candidates
Villa Maria
Springfield, IL**

**Saturday of the 5th Week in Ordinary Time
February 15, 2014**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers [and sisters] in Christ, it is a pleasure to be with you this morning for Mass during this weekend of formation as you continue your journey of discernment and preparation for ordination to the permanent diaconate. The readings provided by the Church for this day offer some particularly helpful reflections with regards to this ministry in the Church for which you are preparing.

As you well know by now, the word “deacon” is derived from the Greek word *diakonia* which is often translated as service. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from the Second Vatican Council, which restored the permanent diaconate in the Latin Church, this service is divided into three categories. The deacons, as we read in that document, “serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God.”¹ All three forms of service are interrelated, but it is the third element, that of charity to the people of God, which stands out as the

initiating reason for the diaconate, as seen in the beginning of the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles where seven men are chosen to assist in the daily distribution to the widows.² This ministry of charity is closely related to the Gospel passage that we just heard from the Gospel of St. Mark.

In this account of the feeding of the four thousand, in addition to witnessing the great power of God in providing for the hungry crowd, we also are invited to reflect on the manner in which Christ accomplishes this great miracle. After giving thanks and breaking the seven loaves of bread, the Gospel says that He “gave them to his disciples to distribute” (Mark 8:6). This is an important point in this passage because it highlights how God often accomplishes His work, relying on the cooperation of men. The work is ultimately His, but He has allowed us to share in His work of service to His people.

The ministry of service in which the deacon engages must always be understood in this context of cooperation with Christ. All Christians, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to the work of charity, but the deacons share in this ministry of service in a very unique way in which, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, they are more closely configured to Christ and

participate in His ministry of service in a fuller way than the rest of the lay faithful. With this greater responsibility comes a greater expectation that the man being ordained a deacon to share in that work is to have a deep relationship with Christ in whose name he ministers. By giving serious attention to the spiritual pillar of formation now, rooting your entire life in Christ, you will prepare yourselves well to be those humble ministers who see your work not as your own ministry, but as a sharing in *His* ministry of love for His people.

This more profound relationship with the Lord is surely also helping you to see ever more clearly that to participate in this ministry is not just the result of an attraction on your part to engage in this type of service. The diaconate is a vocation, or a calling from God who has chosen you, God-willing, to share in His ministry of service. It is God who initiates that call, not us.

In our first reading today, we hear a situation that is very much related to what we are reflecting on with regards to this call. We hear how the people of Israel had turned away from God, following their own ways instead of His. The reading points out the following with regard to their treatment of the priesthood as particularly offensive to the Lord: "Whoever

desired it was consecrated and became a priest of the high places” (1 Kings 13:33). The problem here is that the people were the ones who initiated their entrance into the priesthood apart from God’s will which stated that only the people of the tribe of Levi were fit to serve as priests. They let their will overshadow the will of God and thus cut themselves from Him.

Particularly when it comes to the Sacrament of Holy Orders, nobody has the right to demand this sacrament. One is not ordained simply because he desires to become a deacon. This is not, of course, to say that the desire to serve in the ministry of a deacon is bad. This desire is indeed a good thing and a positive indication that God may be calling you to serve the Church in this way. That desire, however, must always submit to the will of God, expressed specifically through the Church who is responsible for confirming the authenticity of such a call.

An important part of your ongoing formation in preparation for ordination is to continue to discern whether God has called you to this. Given that you are more than halfway through your formation, it is a positive sign pointing more and more toward the genuine nature of that call. Even after that call has been confirmed by the Church in calling you to Holy Orders, it is helpful for you to regularly remind yourselves that

your ministry is not our own, but that it is a participation in His ministry, a participation which He invites us to share in for His greater glory and the building up of the Church.

I would like to express my gratitude and encouragement to each of you for your commitment as you continue your formation. The ministry of the deacon is exercised in communion with me as the bishop of this diocese, along with the priests who work most closely with me in my role of shepherding the flock entrusted to me. The three classes of deacons who have been ordained ahead of you are doing important work in our parishes and I have no doubt that the gifts you bring will be equally beneficial to the faithful of our diocese.

As we continue this Mass, we focus our attention on Christ who is about to come to us in the Eucharist. May our reception of His Body and Blood today draw us into that deeper relationship with Him who is to be at the heart of all that we are and all that we do. May our lives be ever more conformed to His life so that we may become more effective instruments of His love and service to His Church and to the world as we await His return in glory.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 29.

² Acts 6:1-6.