

“The Mother of God as Exemplary of the Deacon’s Three-fold Ministry”

Homily – Mass of Ordination to the Diaconate

May 20, 2017

Readings: Acts 10:37-43; Ps 96; Eph 4:1-7, 11-13; Jn 12:24-26

Introduction

As we progress through this Easter season, we continue to hear from the Acts of the Apostles in our first readings at Mass. We hear about the activity of the first evangelists, and the development of the Church, how the Church quickly grew and adapted in different regions, and developed new offices and new forms of ministry, already within that first generation of Christians.

Mary and the Church

In our second reading today, from the Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul references this growth, noting how grace is given to each person according to the measure of Christ's gift. Paul says that some Christians are called to be apostles, others prophets, others evangelists, and others pastors and teachers, and that each has been given abilities to carry out particular ministries, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith. This diversity of gifts and ministries is what we are about today; for the office of deacon is one example, indeed the first example, in this growth and development of the Church.

The Acts of the Apostles, of course, is the second part of Saint Luke’s writings in the New Testament, the first part being his Gospel. And notice how in both books he begins with the Mother of our Lord. He begins his Gospel with the story of the Annunciation. This is the mystery of the Incarnation, the moment when God’s Son assumed his physical body in Mary’s womb. Then, in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Mary is there at Pentecost, with the disciples gathered in prayer in the upper room. This is the moment when Christ was born in the world in His Mystical Body, which is the Church. Mary’s example here gives us much to contemplate, especially when we consider that today’s ordinations occur in the year in which our Archdiocese will be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart. This is in response to the request of our people, so we are spending this year in preparation, a spiritual preparation above all, for our consecration in October, on the memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary.

Mary and the Diaconal Ministry

We can see in Mary’s life and example three particular moments in which we can learn from her a great deal about the threefold ministry that we celebrate today, that of the deacon. In a few moments our brothers to be ordained will profess their diaconal promises and will assume this threefold responsibility. What are the teaching moments that Mary has for them today?

THE FIRST IS THE ANNUNCIATION, when we see Mary’s receptivity to the Word of God. Her response is, “Be it done to me according to Your Word.” Saint Luke tells us in his Gospel that in regard to the mysteries unfolding through her and taking place before her eyes, Mary pondered all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Likewise, the deacon is receptive to the Word of God, and holds it in his heart and mind. In preaching, in teaching, and by example—as they will pledge before us today—the deacon resolves to hold fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience and to proclaim this faith in word and deed according to the Gospel and the Church’s tradition.

Saint Paul, again in Ephesians, says that the proclamation of the Word is for building up unity in the faith, by which he means unity of belief, the full acceptance of the authoritative apostolic tradition, free from any false promises that can lead us away from Christ. The deacon must first himself ponder the Word of God, as did Our Lady. He must ponder that Word before he can become a minister of that Word. He must be a man of the Word, and the Word must be a part of who he is. Then he can preach, teach, and act in a way that builds up this unity of faith.

The deacon is uniquely positioned to do this, to build up this unity of faith, especially by way of his example. He is a sacred minister, yet he lives very much in the midst of the world, carrying out a secular employment, rubbing shoulders with many sorts of people, including those who are far away from Christ. He can be the bridge for those who are far away, leading them into the unity of faith—and how great a need there is in our own time to build up this unity of faith in the Church, to protect our people from the deceptions of the evil one, of those false promises that sometimes masquerade as easy solutions to difficult situations. The deacon, above all, is the one in a position to accompany those seeking their way, as Mary accompanied those first disciples.

THIS LEADS US TO A SECOND TEACHING MOMENT in the life of Our Lady, and that is the Visitation. Immediately after receiving the news that she is to be the mother of God's Son, Mary goes to spend time with her relative, Elizabeth. Certainly she wanted to share this good news with her, but she also went to be at her kinswoman's service, for Elizabeth, too, was expecting a child, and she was elderly, and Mary in fact spent several months with her relative, right up to the day of Elizabeth's delivery. The responsibility of the deacon is marked most especially by this life of service, by the ministry of charity. Today the deacons will pledge to resolve to discharge the office of deacon with humble charity in order to assist the priestly order and to benefit the Christian people.

Now, humility and charity are the call of every Christian, and indeed are the hallmarks of the Christian life. But the deacon lives these out in a particular way. It must begin with the sense of humility, of lowering ourselves. Our Lord says in the Gospel, that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat—but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Then he goes on to speak some rather startling words: "Whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for life eternal." Well, that grain of wheat first of all is himself. He fell to the earth in his Incarnation when he came down from heaven, and when he died on the cross, and his death has borne much fruit in the flourishing of believers incorporated into his mystical body, the Church.

But the Lord needs human agents to continue this work. The deacon is set aside by a special consecration for this work, as he pledges to resolve to be consecrated to the Church's ministry by the laying on of hands and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As a consecrated man, he is set aside for this service of humble charity. The deacon lives this out by disposing himself to the service of the Church. Our brothers will make a promise of obedience to me and my successors. The deacon promises obedience to his bishop. He can no longer pick and choose which area of Church life he wishes to be involved in, nor to do it for a while and then opt out. Rather, he disposes himself, places himself at the direction of his bishop, putting aside all other pursuits, forsaking all secondary interests. This is what the Lord means by "hating" one's own life: it means preferring nothing to Christ and to being His servant.

FINALLY, WE SEE A THIRD TEACHING MOMENT: we see Mary at the foot of the cross. Mary gave Jesus, our Lord, his body and blood; her blood commingled with his as she carried him in her womb. Now, at the cross, she sees him shedding his blood to the point of death for the

salvation of mankind. There, she is perfectly spiritually united to him in this sacrifice. The deacon is also a minister of the altar, which means that he is a minister of the Eucharist. The role of the deacon at Mass is defined especially by this sense of being a minister of the Eucharist, of the Chalice, of distributing the Blood of Christ. Again, another promise each deacon makes today is to be resolved to conform his way of life to the example of Christ, of whose Body and Blood he is a minister at the altar.

Service is really the unifying gift of all of that the deacon is and all that he does. His ministry at the altar, and especially as a minister of the Eucharist, denotes that he is a servant of Communion. He serves the communion of the Church by building up our unity in the faith, by his preaching, his teaching, his charity and the example of his life.

Conclusion

As at that first Pentecost, so at every moment in the lives of the followers of her Son today, Mary is there. She is there with us, accompanying us, praying with us, and praying for us, always leading us more deeply into communion with her Son. As we celebrate this significant moment, in which more sacred ministers will be consecrated to the Church's service, in this significant year in which our Archdiocese will be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart, let us always remember that all will go well if we obey her commandment given in the last words the Gospels record her speaking, and if we follow her example in doing so: "Do whatever he tells you."