

**Homily for Institution of the Ministry of Acolyte
for Permanent Deacon Class of 2016
June 6, 2015**

**Villa Maria Catholic Life Center
Springfield, IL**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and deacon[s], permanent deacon candidates, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ ; it is good for us to be here as we celebrate this Mass during which the Ministry of Acolyte will be conferred upon these men as they continue their formation program in preparation for ordination to the permanent diaconate.

Before the year 2006, if you were to ask most Catholics in the pews what an acolyte was, most, if they had even heard that word, would point to one of the altar servers at Mass. The term acolyte had been thrown around loosely to include just about anybody who assisted at the altar in some way during Mass. But in 2006, the Church in the United States became much more aware of this specific ministry in the Church as a result of a directive handed down by the Holy See.

Prior to October 2006, a special indult, or permission, was given for members of the laity in the Church in the United States to assist with the

purification of vessels used in the celebration of the Eucharist at Mass. The Holy Father decided that such permission should no longer be given and that the Church in the United States should conform to the universal law set forth in General Instruction of the Roman Missal which states that the purification of vessels should be limited to priests, deacons, or instituted acolytes.

There were some who were introduced to this ministry of the instituted acolyte for the first time and questions arose as to why *they* were permitted to purify the vessels while the rest of the laity were no longer permitted. Some argued that, with proper training, they were just as capable and just as knowledgeable as an acolyte to perform this duty.

The problem with making this argument is that the ministry of acolyte was seen from a purely functional standpoint. The focus was on what they could *do*, and not so much on who they *were*. In short, an acolyte is a man chosen by God to play a special role in the Church's Eucharistic life. It is not a right that is to be claimed. Rather, it is something for which you, my dear candidates, have been chosen.

Just a moment ago, your names were called as ones to be instituted to this ministry of acolyte. This calling has come to you from through His

Church. When I pray the Prayer of Blessing over you in a few minutes, you will hear me ask God to bless you “who have been chosen for the ministry of acolyte.” This is not just a reminder given to silence those who might oppose the special role entrusted to instituted acolytes, it is a reminder to each of you that this is not something that you take as though the Church owes it to you. Rather, you must realize with great humility that this is a gift to be received from the God who has chosen to give it to you.

For your part, you must also resist the temptation to see the ministry of acolyte through that purely functional perspective. It is even quite possible that you might hear this from others, even other priests and deacons. They may be looking forward to having an instituted acolyte around, grateful for all of the additional things that you will now be able to do. While it is true that you can “do” more, this ministry means much more than that.

An important part of being an acolyte is being a man more closely united to the Eucharist. With this ministry, you are being invited to come closer to Christ in the Eucharist as you assist priests and deacons at the altar and as you distribute the Body and Blood of Christ to the faithful.

You should be humbled to be so close to this great gift, which is the source and summit of our Catholic faith. You are also invited to strive to live more fully by the Lord's sacrifice and to be molded more perfectly in its likeness. In other words, your life should become more like that of Christ, who has come not to do His own will, but the will of the one who sent Him in a perfect sacrifice of obedience to the Father.

Conforming your life to that of Christ is not accomplished primarily through exercising the functions of your ministry. Rather, it is accomplished by having a personal and loving relationship with Him, one that begins with and is nourished through daily prayer. In a particular way, prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament should have a prominent place in your spiritual life so that you will be constantly renewed in your love for our Eucharistic Lord, thus enabling you to perform the duties of an acolyte with greater reverence and zeal.

You will also accomplish this conformity to Christ by continually growing in your identity as a man for others. As ministers of the Church, your primary role is to be of service to the people, and not the other way around. This means that you have to be willing to make sacrifices with regard to your time and your plans should the needs of the faithful require

it. Those sacrifices should not be met with grumbling or complaining, but should be welcomed as an invitation to a closer union with Christ whom we serve in our brothers and sisters, for as He Himself said, “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

I also would like to renew the words of encouragement that I gave to you last year when you were installed as lectors, to avoid seeing this as just another step toward the final goal of ordination. It is more important now to be mindful of that since this is your final step before being ordained next June, God-willing. It will be tempting to focus on that end and just push through this final year, doing whatever it takes to finish. Resist the temptation to let any area of your formation become weak in this final stretch. Recommitting yourself to engage fully in every aspect of your formation this year will be the very best form of preparation for your ordination, as it will show that you are truly dedicated to this vocation to which the Lord has chosen for you to follow.

As you prepare to be instituted to the ministry of acolyte for the Church, pray that you will be open to having your lives more firmly rooted in your relationship with our Eucharistic Lord. Strive to spend time with

Him more than ever before and to receive Him in Holy Communion as often as possible, so that with greater love and joy you will share Him with those to whom you have been called to minister. May God who has begun the good work in you through His calling you to this vocation continue to form you as men after the model of His Sacred Heart for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

May God give us this grace. Amen.