

## INSTITUTION OF ACOLYTE FOR PERMANENT DEACON CANDIDATES

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Sunday, May 15, 2011**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear priests, deacons, consecrated religious, candidates for institution to the ministry of acolyte and their families and friends, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ:

At our Mass this morning, it is my privilege as diocesan bishop to confer the institution of the ministry of acolyte on these candidates in the formation program leading to ordination to the permanent status of deacon. Being a bit of a word maven, I like to look up the etymology or origins of words. The word “acolyte” comes from Medieval Latin, *acolytus*, which derives from the Greek *akolouthos*, meaning *attendant* or *follower*. In a generic sense, the word “acolyte” is used to denote a follower, a companion, a fan, a supporter, a pupil, a believer, an admirer, a backer, a partisan, and a disciple. In the ecclesial context, an acolyte is someone who assists a priest in a Catholic liturgical service. An acolyte spelled with a small “a” often is used simply to refer to any altar server. But in this formal institution to the Ministry of Acolyte, with a capital “A,” canon law

provides that a man officially instituted into the Ministry of Acolyte is constituted as an extraordinary minister of holy communion (canon 910, §2) to give holy communion to the faithful at liturgy and to the sick. In addition, in the absence of a priest, you are authorized to serve as a minister of exposition and reposition of the Blessed Sacrament without benediction (canon 943). The main point is that the functions of an acolyte bring him into close relation with liturgical services, where we give glory to God and which lead them to the ministry of service to their brothers and sisters. This will serve as helpful preparation for the more extensive liturgical functions and diaconal service that by the grace of God these men will exercise some day as deacons.

Thus, it is important to put this institution of Acolytes in relation to the larger picture of the vocations to which these men are called. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (“I Will Give You Shepherds”), our great Holy Father, Blessed Pope John Paul II, said this about the gift of vocation in relation to the Church: “Each Christian vocation comes from God and is God’s gift. However, it is never bestowed outside of or independently of the Church. Instead it always comes about in the Church

and through the Church because, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, God has willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.’ [*Lumen Gentium* 9].”

In this regard, dear brothers, your ministry as deacon must be seen in terms of your relationship to your bishop, your parish priests and the entire Christian community. In particular, you must look at your ministry in relation to the ministry of priests, and, as such, you should have a special regard for assisting me and the entire Catholic community in promoting vocations to the priesthood. For without priests, your ministry is diminished and disconnected.

It is therefore fitting that the Vatican has designated today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, commonly known as Good Shepherd Sunday, as the 48<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Pope Benedict XVI has asked everyone in the Church to urge youth to consider becoming priests and consecrated religious. In his message for the 48<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations, the Holy Father said, “Particularly in these times, when the voice of the Lord

seems to be drowned out by 'other voices' and his invitation to follow him by the gift of one's own life may seem too difficult, every Christian community, every member of the Church, needs consciously to feel responsibility for promoting vocations. It is important to encourage and support those who show clear signs of a call to priestly life and religious consecration, and to enable them to feel the warmth of the whole community as they respond 'yes' to God and the Church. I encourage them, in the same words which I addressed to those who have already chosen to enter the seminary: 'You have done a good thing. Because people will always have need of God, even in an age marked by technical mastery of the world and globalization: they will always need the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the God who gathers us together in the universal Church in order to learn with him and through him life's true meaning and in order to uphold and apply the standards of true humanity' (Letter to Seminarians, 18 October 2010)."

In order to heed the Holy Father's call to everyone in the Church to urge youth to consider becoming priests, it might be helpful to know something about the qualities of those who are being ordained priests this

year in the United States. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), a Georgetown University-based research center conducted a survey of this year's priesthood ordination class. Around a third of those being ordained have a relative who is a priest or a religious. Over half of the class has more than two siblings, with a quarter of those surveyed reporting five or more siblings. The report noted that 21% of those being ordained participated in a World Youth Day before entering the seminary. It added that 70% of the class regularly prayed the rosary, and 65% participated in Eucharistic adoration before entering the seminary. The average age at which those surveyed first thought about a priestly vocation was 16. For 66% of the respondents, a priest encouraged them to consider the priesthood. Some 71% reported that they were also encouraged in their vocational discernment by a friend, parent, grandparent, relative or parishioner, while half also reported that someone discouraged them in this path.

In a sense, every religious vocation starts out as an acolyte in the sense of being a follower and companion of the Lord Jesus. In today's Gospel (John 1:1-10), Jesus first identifies himself, not as the Good

Shepherd, but as the gate for the sheep. In the ancient walls of Jerusalem, there was a gate on the north of the city, by which animals were brought in from the surrounding areas for sacrifice. It was called the sheep gate.

Once inside the city and within the temple courts, there was only one door where the sheep went in, and no lamb ever came back out after entering the temple precincts. They traveled in only one direction, and there they were sacrificed for the sins of human beings.

For that first audience who heard Jesus' teaching about sheep, such knowledge added to the shock of his words: "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ... I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture" (John 10:7,9). In the very temple area filled with sheep on their way to slaughter, Jesus declared there was a way out: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11).

Jesus speaks of sheep in the very place where they were about to be slaughtered. Unlike the shepherd among innocent lambs in many of our imaginary scenes of sheep and shepherds on peaceful hillsides, tending these sheep requires something more than a gentle hand and a watchful

eye. They must be protected from the powers of death. Jesus teaches that anyone who does not enter into the sheepfold to care for the sheep through this gate -- Jesus himself -- is a thief and a bandit. No one comes to the Father except through him.

Commenting on today's Gospel passage during World Youth Day 1993 in Denver, Colorado, Blessed John Paul II said:

"Christ -- the Good Shepherd -- is present among us, among the peoples, nations, generations and races, as the One who 'lays down his life for the sheep.' [...] Yes, the Good Shepherd lays down his life, but only to take it up again (John 10:17). And in the new life of the Resurrection, he has become -- in the words of St. Paul - 'a life-giving spirit' (1 Corinthians 15:45), who can now bestow the gift of Life on all who believe in him.

"Life laid down -- Life taken up again -- Life given. In him, we have that Life which he has in the unity of the Father and of the Holy Spirit." It is that Life, laid down, taken up, and given for us that we now prepare to receive in this Eucharist.

May God give you this grace. Amen.