

**Homily for Institution of the Ministry of Lector
for Permanent Deacon Class of 2016
June 7, 2014**

**St. Francis of Assisi Church
Chiara 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 Lector will be conferred upon these men as they continue their formation program in preparation for ordination to the permanent diaconate.

Just under a month ago, at the ordination of four of our seminarians to the transitional diaconate in our Cathedral, I spoke about the unfortunate situation in which some people look upon this step in their journey of formation as somehow less important than what will happen on the day of their ordination to the priesthood. While it may not be their final destination, I reminded them of the importance of what they were receiving and to take it seriously as an integral part of their identity as men called to be of service to Christ and His Church.

A similar dynamic may exist with the steps that precede ordination to the diaconate, one of which we are celebrating today in the Institution of the Ministry of Lector. There can be the temptation to see this ritual as just another hurdle to clear on the path toward the final goal of receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The Church, however, would like for us to be mindful of the significance of this step, along with that of receiving the Ministry of Acolyte, as fundamental and essential parts of the ministry that you are preparing to receive.

Pope Paul VI, in a letter describing the norms for the restored order of the permanent diaconate, explains the importance of these two ministries, helping us to see how they are more than just a box to be checked as you move forward. He writes:

It is especially fitting that the ministries of lector and acolyte should be entrusted to those who, as candidates for the order of diaconate or priesthood, desire to devote themselves to God and to the Church in a special way. For the Church, which “does not cease to take the bread of life from the table of the word of God and the body of Christ and offer it to the faithful,”¹ considers it to be very opportune that both by study and by gradual exercise of the ministry of the word

and of the altar, candidates for sacred orders should through intimate contact understand and reflect upon the double aspect of the priestly office. Thus it comes about that the authenticity of the ministry shines out with the greatest effectiveness. In this way the candidates accede to sacred orders fully aware of their vocation, fervent in spirit serving the Lord, constant in prayer and aware of the needs of the faithful (cf. Romans 12:11-13).²

The Ministry of Lector, which you, dear candidates, are about to receive, is a privileged opportunity to prepare yourselves well for Holy Orders by already beginning to participate in the Church's mission of preaching the Gospel to the whole world.

You will take part in this mission in various ways, such as proclaiming the Word in the liturgical assembly, instructing people, young and old, in the faith, and spreading the message of salvation to those who have not yet heard it. By doing this, you will be inviting people to come to know Christ, the Word of God, who is the path that leads to eternal salvation. The dedication that you give to these tasks now will provide for rich soil from which your future ministry will bear abundant fruit in the lives of those whom you will serve.

To exercise the Ministry of Lector well is more than just acquiring knowledge of the Scriptures and gaining proficiency in proclaiming the Word. Not only are you passing on the Word of God, you must also be attentive in receiving it into your hearts. It is therefore important for you to meditate on the Word constantly, deepening your love for the Sacred Scriptures daily. From that love will flow a more genuine proclamation that is rooted in a life that has been formed by the Word.

In this regard, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, offers a helpful story from his book, *Priests for the Third Millennium*, which highlights the importance of this intimate relationship with the Word to ministry. He recounts an event in which Archbishop Fulton Sheen was at a dinner party along with Richard Burton, a well-known Shakespearean actor. The host of the dinner party invited each of them to recite Psalm 23 for the audience. Cardinal Dolan writes the following about their recitation:

Richard Burton did so with the precision, the cadence, and drama one would expect from a Shakespearean actor, and the guests applauded vigorously; Fulton Sheen then read the psalm with obvious devotion, meaning, and depth, and the guests remained in

reverential silence. The host commented, "The actor knew the psalm, the preacher knew the Shepherd."³

You, too, are invited to not just know the written text of the Word, but to know the person, the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ.

It was from this intimate relationship with Christ that St. John was able to write the words we heard in our second reading: "what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). These words provide a good summary for what the ministry of the Word is directed toward, namely, drawing people into fellowship with God and one another, a fellowship that is personal and not just intellectual.

As you prepare to receive the Ministry of Lector today, dear candidates, and as we all prepare to receive the Word made flesh in the Eucharist, let us seek to imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose intimacy with the Word resulted in a heart that was ever obedient to His will and open to being an instrument of His love and mercy to those around her. Let us be attentive and obedient to that Word, trusting that He will guide us in our lives and our ministry of sharing Him with the world around us,

bringing light and hope to His people as we all journey along the way of the Cross to the glory of the Resurrection, where we hope to be united with Him and all of the saints, for all eternity, in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Dei Verbum*, no. 21.

² Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Letter Containing Norms for the Order of Diaconate*, 15 August 1972.

³ Cardinal Timothy Dolan, *Priests for the Third Millennium*, 299.