

**Homily for Institution of the Ministry of Lector
Solemnity of St. Joseph
March 19, 2014**

**Sacred Heart School of Theology
Hales Corners, WI**

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My dear priests, deacons, consecrated religious, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ; in the main chapel at Mundelein Seminary in the Archdiocese of Chicago, the entrance into the sanctuary contains four steps with four different inscriptions on each step. These inscriptions are the Latin words for the former minor orders that were historically conferred upon men as they progressed in their seminary formation on the way to priesthood, beginning with porter, followed by lector, exorcist, and then acolyte. In the sanctuary itself, there are three more steps leading up to where the high altar once stood with inscriptions for the three major orders of subdeacon, deacon, and finally, priest.

After 1972, the steps by which men advance toward the priesthood have been slightly altered. No longer are the minor orders conferred, nor is the major order of the subdiaconate. The former minor orders of lector and acolyte, however, have been preserved in the form of ministries that are

conferred through a rite of institution, as opposed to an ordination.¹ Pope Paul VI, in a letter describing the norms for the restored order of the permanent diaconate, explains the importance of these two ministries, and in doing so, also retains the significance of the symbolism seen in the steps seen in the chapel at Mundelein. 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,”² 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).³

The Ministry of Lector, which you, dear candidates, are about to receive, is indeed a step closer to the diaconate and the priesthood, where you will exercise more completely the duty of proclaiming the Word of God. This step, however, is not one just to be seen as another hurdle to clear on the sprint toward the finish line of ordination. It is, rather, 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 and former Archbishop of this local Church in Milwaukee, 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."⁴

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.

Today, the Church pauses during this penitential season of Lent to celebrate the Solemnity of St. Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church. It is indeed fitting that the institution of the Ministry of Lector is conferred upon you today as we celebrate this feast of the foster-father of the Word. His whole life revolved around the Word, from his being obedient to message of God through the Archangel Gabriel, to his fatherly care and protection of Jesus in their home in Nazareth.

In the Mass marking the beginning of his ministry as Bishop of Rome exactly one year ago today, Pope Francis reflected on the example of St. Joseph and the role that had been entrusted to him as the protector of Jesus, Mary, and the Church. In considering how Joseph responded to this call, the Holy Father offers an explanation which is well suited for this occasion as you prepare to enter into a deeper relationship with the Word today. He explained that Joseph responded “[b]y being constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God’s presence and receptive to God’s plans, and not simply to his own. This is what God asked of David, as we heard in the first reading. God does not want a house built by men, but faithfulness to his word, to his plan.”⁵

Personally I am deeply honored to confer the Ministry of Lector today on my eleventh anniversary of ordination as a Bishop. As you prepare to receive the Ministry of Lector this evening, dear candidates, and as we all prepare to receive the Word made flesh in the Eucharist, may we seek to imitate St. Joseph in our faithfulness to God's Word as He communicated Himself in our lives. Let us be ever 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 will be united with the Word for all eternity.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Paul VI, *Ministeria quaedam*, 15 August 1972.

² *Dei Verbum*, no. 21.

³ Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Letter Containing Norms for the Order of Diaconate*, 15 August 1972.

⁴ Cardinal Timothy Dolan, *Priests for the Third Millennium*, 299.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Mass for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome*, 19 March, 2013.