

**Homily for the Permanent Diaconate Ordination
of the Class of 2016
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

Saturday June 25, 2016

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Bishop Kemme, Reverend Monsignors and Fathers, Deacons, consecrated men and women religious, *ordinandi*, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here to celebrate this Ordination Mass for these eleven men who have been chosen by God to fulfill the ministry of the diaconate in the Church here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. The Church in central Illinois rejoices as these men join the ranks of the other deacons of our diocese, men who have been a wonderful blessing to the Catholic life of our faithful.

While studying in Rome, I had the opportunity to visit several churches, admiring their architectural magnificence and many beautiful works of art. Among my favorite works is the apse mosaic above the altar in the Basilica of San Clemente. At the center of the mosaic is a Crucifixion scene. Below the Cross is a lush, green plant, out of which spreads an

intricate network of vines, giving nourishment to the various aspects of the Church and life.

This image calls to mind the words of Jesus in John's Gospel which immediately precede the words that we just heard. Jesus says the following: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Even here in our own Cathedral, you will notice the image of the vine in different parts of the artwork, such as around the mosaic above the high altar, at the ambo, in the bottom panels of the stained-glass windows, and around the upper border of the Cathedral.

This image of the vine and the branches, along with Christ's teaching on that image, as found in this first half of the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel, is helpful for our reflection today. In particular, I would like to focus on the second to last sentence of today's Gospel, as they offer some helpful reminders to you, our candidates for ordination, as you prepare to be ordained to the sacred order of deacons in just a few moments.

First of all, Jesus tells His disciples that "[i]t was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you" (John 15:16). This is something of which all Christians, especially those in ordained ministry,

need to be reminded. God always takes the initiative in calling us to be of service to one another and to His Church. You have worked hard for the past five years to prepare for this day, but you must not view your reception of this sacrament as something you have earned, strictly speaking. Every sacrament is a gift that is generously given, not one that is taken. Ordained ministry is a privilege and not a right that any of us can claim.

I remind you of this because your awareness of this should remain with you throughout your lives as deacons. Realizing that you have been chosen by God to fulfill this ministry should leave you in a constant attitude of awe and humility. As ordained ministers, all of us have to fight the temptation to entitlement, thinking we deserve what we have because of who we are or what we have done. This cannot be the case for us.

It is not because you are the most talented men of the diocese that you are here in this sanctuary today, but rather, it is out of the sheer generosity of God and His desire to share these particular gifts with each of you that you are here. As I said, when we truly grasp this, we are left with a true sense of wonder that God has chosen us, and that wonder will yield a grateful heart that echoes the words of the Psalmist who sang: "How can

I repay the Lord for all the great good done for me? I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord” (Ps. 116:12-13). In other words, our gratitude to God will move us to give more generously of ourselves to those whom we have been called to serve. In a sense, it frees us to be the ministers *He* wants us to be, not who *we* think we should be.

Jesus continues His exhortation by telling His disciples that He has appointed them “to go and bear fruit that will remain” (John 15:16). Your being chosen is not just something honorary, like receiving an award. Your being chosen is tied to a mission, a mission to go out and bear fruit. And the mission that you are receiving is one that is unique to you as deacons.

We see the roots of this in the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles. We hear how the needs of the Church were not being met due to the fact that the apostles were focused on that which was proper to their vocation, namely “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Seven men were therefore chosen to undertake the ministry of service, or in the Greek, *diakonia*, from which the word deacon derives.

In those early days of the Church, the specific ministry of these men was “to serve at table” (Acts 6:2). Over time, the ministry of the diaconate has evolved. The Church teaches that it is the duty of the deacon “to

administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, to officiate at funeral and burial services.”¹

The graces of ordination impart a sacramental grace which enables you to perform these duties in a way by which greater fruit will result. In an address to permanent deacons during his trip to the United States in 1987, Pope St. John Paul II explained this in the following way:

The service of the deacon is the Church’s service sacramentalized. Yours is not just one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be, as Paul VI described it, a “driving force” for the Church’s *diakonia*. By your ordination you are configured to Christ in his servant role. You are also meant to be living signs of the servanthood of his Church.²

It is true that all Christians are called to a life of service, but the expectation is even greater for you because of the sacramental gift that unites you to Christ, the model servant, in a unique way. It is therefore

important to be aware of the need that you have each day to live and grow as faithful servants of Christ and His Church.

In the recent Jubilee of Deacons held at the Vatican, Pope Francis reflected on the role of being a servant with the following words on how to live this role with fidelity. He said:

How do we become “good and faithful servants” (cf. Mt 25:21)? As a first step, we are asked to be available. A servant daily learns detachment from doing everything his own way and living his life as he would. Each morning he trains himself to be generous with his life and to realize that the rest of the day will not be his own, but given over to others. One who serves cannot hoard his free time; he has to give up the idea of being the master of his day. He knows that his time is not his own, but a gift from God which is then offered back to him. Only in this way will it bear fruit. ... In this way, dear deacons, if you show that you are available to others, your ministry will not be self-serving, but evangelically fruitful.³

In light of those words of advice, we can see how this is very much related to the first point that I made about recognizing that our call comes from God, and not ourselves. If we were to see our ministry as something

that is our own, as something we have earned, or something that we deserve, we will become selective in how we choose to exercise our ministry.

We are honored to have Bishop Carl Kemme, Bishop of Wichita and a former priest of our diocese, here with us today. As you likely know, the Diocese of Wichita is well known for their living a stewardship way of life. When some of my staff and I went to visit Wichita to learn about this model, it was explained that one of the most counterproductive things that works against stewardship is another form of -ship. To use their words: "the ship that sinks stewardship is ownership."

When we try to claim our ministry, our time, or our gifts as our own, we limit our ability to yield the fruit expected of us by Our Lord. It is therefore important, as you begin your ordained ministry, to strive each day to recognize the privilege you have been given to serve and then to be generous in your stewardship of sharing those gifts bestowed upon you through ordination. If you do this, then you will indeed bear fruit not primarily for yourselves, but in the lives of the people whom you are called to serve.

The conclusion to the instruction from Jesus in the Gospel passage is a reminder that, in the end, the foundation for our ministry must be prayer. He tells His disciples that “whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you” (John 15:16). These words remind us that our ministry must always be exercised in union with Christ, who is Himself united to the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit. The most effective way of staying united with Him in our ministry is to be committed to a deeper life of prayer than ever.

Just last year, when you received the Ministry of Acolyte, I cautioned you against seeing your new ministry from a purely functional point of view, focusing more on what you *do* than on who you *are*. I think it is important to revisit that point, as the temptation will be there once again after you are ordained. I just listed several of the things that you will now be called upon to *do* in your ministry as a deacon, and the opportunities to perform these duties will be greater than ever.

By taking time to pray in silence with the Lord each day, you will resist this temptation to focus just on function. Instead, you will be reminded of who you are, and Jesus reminds us who we are in our Gospel for today: “I have called you friends” (John 15:15). As friends, we have the

great privilege of accompanying Him in a special way as we assist in the ministry of service in the Church. But prayer reminds us as well that we are also beloved sons of God. Later on in the New Testament, John makes this clear when he writes the following: “[s]ee what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are” (1 John 3:1). Only prayer can remind us of our supreme dignity as His sons, His friends, and His servants. It will be out of our constant awareness of this identity that we will be enabled to be the ministers that He is calling us to be.

[O]ur divine sonship urges us to translate the overflow of our interior life into apostolic activity, just as our friendship with God leads us to place ourselves at ‘the service of all men. We are called to use the gifts God has given us as instruments to help others discover Christ.’⁴

I urge you, therefore, never to forget to make prayer the absolute center of your lives. Resist the temptation to become overwhelmed with activity, for if that activity is not sustained by a solid life of prayer, it will become barren and you will risk losing your direction in ministry.

As we continue our ordination ceremony, I thank you for your willingness to say ‘yes’ to this call to serve as a deacon in the Church. It is

my sincere prayer that you will receive this gift with gratitude and humility, knowing that *who* you are called to *be* and *what* you are called to *do* are all dependent on God. He is the vine, you are, in a sense, new branches just sprouting. Abide in His love each day, and you will witness that, despite your weaknesses, God will bring about the growth in you that will enable you to be the stewards of His gifts for the good of the Church in central Illinois, and after a life of generous service in His vineyard, you will hear those words we all long to hear: “Well done, my good and faithful servant...Come, share your master’s joy” (Matthew 25:21).

May God give you this grace. Amen.

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, §29.

² Pope John Paul II, *Meeting with the Men Ordained to the Permanent Diaconate*, 19 September 1987, §2.

³ Pope Francis, *Homily at Jubilee of Deacons*, 29 May 2016.

⁴ *Saint John’s Gospel*, The Navarre Bible (Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers, 2005), 160.