

**Mass for Gathering with Permanent Deacons
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

August 12, 2017

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Readings: Deuteronomy 6:4-13, Psalm 18, Matthew 17:14-20

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good for us to be here for my annual gathering with you, our permanent deacons, and your wives. Our gathering this year takes place while our diocese is in the midst of our Fourth Diocesan Synod, during which we are looking into how we can grow in our collective commitment to the discipleship and stewardship way of life.

Our first reading today calls us to remember the foundational prayer of Judaism, the *Shema Israel*. Faithful Jews were asked to pray these few, simple lines several times a day, and it was the poetic hope that one would die with this prayer on one's lips. This mustard seed of a prayer not only establishes the oneness of our God, but it also clearly teaches that God desires the entire person to be swept up in response to His tremendous and tender love in heart, soul and strength. These areas of our lives are crucial,

for it is the heart where thinking and planning occur), the soul where vitality flourishes, and strength, which is literally one's possessions.

Our Lord understood the great power of this prayer to center our human lives in God and to give us meaning and purpose. He taught that the *Shema* was the first of the two greatest commandments, adding love of neighbor as self as the second. Jesus, who is the living embodiment of these two commandments, desires that we learn from Him, to center ourselves in him, and to trust our lives to His loving providence, finding there our strength and our hope. We encounter in Him the power and comfort of real love.

As Deacons you strive to become the icon of Christ the Servant. Through your ministry and the lives you lead, centered in the faith that comes from the knowledge and experience of that love of God, you bring others the saving hope of God. You challenge and invite them to a life centered in God. As ministers we have the unique blessing and opportunity to share the lives of God's people. In the midst of their griefs and joys, pains and sorrows, your ministry helps to ground, support and nourish them. In you the people of God are to experience mercy, joy,

forgiveness, and compassion. In short, in meeting you, they should be brought closer to God.

This is possible inasmuch as you are willing be intentional in having trust and confidence in God's providence. Our task is to trust in God who can do what seems impossible, if that is truly for our benefit. God responds to human needs, not necessarily our wants. It is God who cures, and possibly moves mountains, not us. Even in the struggles of ministry and life, this surety of faith reminds us that we are never abandoned.

A pivotal incident in the life of the Jewish philosopher, Victor Frankl, illustrates this truth beautifully. Frankl was arrested and sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Immediately after arrival, he and those arriving with him were stripped of their clothes and ordered to dress in the dirty ragged remnants of clothes left by those inmates already sent to the gas chamber. In this exchange, intended to humiliate and de-humanize the inmates, Frankl lost the manuscript of his life's work which he had hidden in the pocket of his coat. On donning the coat of a dead man, he reached into the pocket and found there a single sheet of paper which had been ripped from a Jewish prayer book. On this page was written the *Shema Israel*. Frankl writes, "How should I have interpreted such a "coincidence"

other than as a challenge to *live* my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?"

This mustard seed of a prayer had given strength in the midst of suffering and death to a nameless man and it helped Frankl to realize, "There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life...he who has a WHY to live for can bear almost any HOW."

In this Eucharist we intimately encounter our WHY for living.

May God give this grace. Amen.