

**Homily for the Permanent Diaconate Ordination
of James Dodge
Saint Aloysius Church
Springfield, Illinois**

Saturday December 30, 2017

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Monsignors and Fathers, Deacons, consecrated men and women religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here to celebrate this Ordination Mass for James Dodge, who has 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 he joins the ranks of the other deacons of our diocese, men who have been a wonderful blessing to the Catholic life of our faithful.

By way of introduction, let me take you back in time to May of 1953, when a textbook salesman knocked on the door of the up-and-coming author, Flannery O'Connor. She welcomed him into her home, and their conversation drifted from pleasantries like the weather, to her farm, his book sales, and even to Catholicism. Upon discovering Flannery's almost fierce devotion to her Catholic faith, the salesman admitted he wasn't much of a believer, but that he *had* brushed up against the faith twice

during his time in New York City: he had studied philosophy and taught German at Fordham University, a Jesuit school, and he had met Dorothy Day. He had become fascinated by Day's Catholic Worker House, which was about an hour south of the University.

Flannery would later explain to a friend that her salesman guest said he could not see, in his words, why Dorothy Day "fed endless lines of endless bums for whom there was no hope. She'd never see any results from that." After spending some time discussing the point, O'Connor admits that the only conclusion they could agree to "was that Charity was not understandable ..." – ending her story with the almost question, "Strange people turn up, don't they."¹

That was probably what Joseph and Mary were thinking when the prophetess Anna abruptly and unexpectedly inserted herself among the holy family, praising God and speaking of their child whom she had only just laid eyes on. But unlike the traveling salesman, Anna understood hope! An elderly woman widowed for many years, Anna spent day and night in the Temple court, praying, fasting, worshiping, and waiting, which is another way of saying she spent night and day immersed in hope and in memory, the temple representing the whole of Israel's hope that God

would again rescue them from their current untenable situation, and the remembering, the recalling of how He done so in the past.

On seeing the child, Anna somehow knows her many years of vigil are over; that in this child, hope and memory are wed in such a way as to be fulfilled. God had once again kept His promise of salvation and sent the Messiah to deliver them from their captivity – not just this time, but for all time.

And here He is.

Anna had much time to meditate on the biblical and salvific events of the past. She has, in fact, made Israel's memory her own; she has made the story of the scriptures the story of her own life. Accordingly, she, like any prophet, cannot help but to tell others that their hope is not in vain, that God has kept His promises to them and how He has done so.

The scriptures make this point explicitly, that after coming upon Christ, she then “spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.”²

But Anna is not the only one to speak up in response to encountering Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, everyone seems to speak of it. Luke employs the Greek word, *laleo*, meaning, “to speak,” thirty-one times in his Gospel and

twice that number in *The Acts of Apostles*, the sequel to his Gospel.³ In almost every case, it is more like preaching and less like speaking. It is a response to the Lord and what He is all about. When one experiences hope fulfilled, it seems one cannot help but tell of it. Consider a few of the examples Luke gives:

The Angel Gabriel speaks good news to Zechariah in the Temple, Elizabeth speaks of joy at hearing of Mary's faith, the shepherds speak of encountering the angelic host, demons speak of Jesus being the Son of God as He casts them out, the son of the widow of Nain speaks after Jesus raises him from the dead, the disciples speak after walking with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and Jesus speaks his peace to his disciples after the Resurrection.

God's fidelity manifested before the eyes of the faithful elicits a response from them: they speak; they speak of faith to those in search of it. Anna witnesses to this pattern of evangelization, of hearing the Good News and responding to it.

But it is the Apostle John in the first reading today who discerns this pattern of evangelization in his own people and then repeats it to them. He retells; you might even say that he "re-speaks" to his people the way in

which they have come to know God, and he does so in a sing-song, repetitive formula so that it may sink down deep within them, lodging in their hearts and minds as a meditation that they may then return to again and again.

Let me now address our candidate for diaconal ordination directly: James, following your ordination to the diaconate today, this will now be your task. God has chosen you to prophesy in the manner of Anna: persevering in prayer, fasting, worship, and waiting, to live in that place where hope and memory meet in fulfillment.

Here in this place of prayerful encounter, you will meet Christ.

Then it will be your joy and your sacred duty to praise God and to speak about Christ to all you meet in search of Him. Wherever you are assigned, you will discern Him at work among His people, and you will remind them of how He comes to them and saves them, repeating it, re-speaking it to them in a way they can meditate on for as long as God gives them.

You will accomplish this in your ministry of the Word, proclaiming the Gospel, preaching, and counseling those who come to you, helping others to make the story of the scriptures the story of their own life. You

will do so also through your ministry of charity, for a deacon is a minister of Christ's own charity. Such works are the incarnation of Christian hope. They are the virtue of hope dressed in work-clothes.

Through your stewardship of Christ's charity, not only will believers be reminded of God's goodness to them, but others who have not yet believed may brush up against living faith and become fascinated by it, like O'Connor's salesman was so many years ago.

Charity may not be understandable — self-sacrifice in the form of self-surrender, the definition of charity — is ultimately an endless mystery to be explored, but it prompts others to take notice.

You might say that it is the wriggle of the worm on the hook, the flash of vigorous life that arrests the eye, and draws in the catch.

Why would a middle-aged woman like Dorothy Day spend her life feeding bums?

Why would a man promise himself to obedient service of Christ and his Church? To prayer? To dedicated service to God's people through the proclamation of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, the offering of Worship to God through Christ, the service of the poor, the faithful, and the searching?

We cannot help but to bite.

Flannery was right: strange people do turn up at our door. Sometimes they insert themselves in our lives to remind us that Christ has come and there is reason to hope in God's fulfilled promises. Sometimes they show up at the door to brush up against our inscrutable charity.

Your ordination will provide the opportunity of both hearing and speaking of God's fidelity to His people in a focused way, of practicing with increased attention and intention, the ways of charity and sacrifice: self-denial, fasting, prayer, almsgiving, of choosing another's good instead of our own as Christ himself did; of replacing our ego with His, our story with His.

Continue to trust in the slow work of God, and the hope that comes from Him — one moment, one day, one life at a time.

Ultimately, we cannot explain charity, or its results, or lack thereof.

That is God's business.

There will always be endless lines of endless bums.

But there will also always be those who hear, as so many do in Luke's Gospel or in the Apostle John's community, who hear God's call to faith, hope, and charity.

There will always be those prophets who persevere in the place of hope and memory and share their graced encounters with Christ with those still in search of the Him.

May we be among that number.

May we be among the number who repeat, who re-speak the Good News which God has spoken to us; may we clothe that message of His fidelity in the flannels and denims of charity, and so fascinate the world into conversion.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Flannery O'Connor, Letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald dated May 7, 1953, collected in *The Habit of Being*, page 58.

² Lk. 2:38

³ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/laleo.html>