

**Homily for the Ordination of
Robert Paul Johnson, Aaron Thomas Kuhn and Mark Walker Tracy
to the Sacred Order of Deacons
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

**Friday in the Octave of Easter
April 21, 2017**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, Deacons, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we gather on this Friday within the Octave of Easter to we celebrate the ordination of these three men, Robert Paul Johnson, Aaron Thomas Kuhn and Mark Walker Tracy, to the Sacred Order of Deacons in the Catholic Church. At the outset, I express my profound gratitude on behalf of the entire community of faith in this Diocese of Springfield in Illinois to the three of you for your willingness to commit your lives in the service of this local Church. Your commitment to diaconal service as you continue your preparation for ordination to the ministerial priesthood helps to strengthen the ability of the all the clergy, religious and lay Catholic faithful to work together as teammates in carrying out the mission entrusted to the Church by Jesus Christ.

As you may know, I like to use sports as an analogy for life, especially the spiritual life. Just the other night we had our “Hockey with Bishop Paprocki” benefit game to support Catholic Charities Legal Services. Playing in that game served a worthwhile charitable purpose and was a lot of fun for me and the other players and fans, but it was also a reminder of the importance of teamwork to overcome obstacles and to achieve a goal. Just as sports can be both challenging and fun while striving to achieve a goal, serving the Church in ordained ministry has its challenges as well as its moments of fun while striving toward the ultimate goal of eternal happiness.

As a goalie, I am constantly being put to the test by my opponents, seeing if they can shoot the puck past my leg pads, stick or gloves. Being a member of a team is often challenging and being a member of God’s team in today’s society is often very difficult. We may get pucks to our face masks in the form of having to work with people who are often negative, we are called to stand up for those who do not have a voice, we are sent to serve in places far away from family and friends, we are criticized for what we do or we are even ridiculed for teaming up with Christ. On God’s team we will be tested, and these challenges can be frightening.

Moreover, many people are afraid to commit to do something for the rest of their lives, whether that be ordination or marriage, because they fear that if they did so they might be making a mistake, they fear that they may not be happy, or they fear that they may come to regret their commitment and may wish that they had chosen to do something else.

Your presence here tonight says to the Body of Christ that you have decided to make this commitment as part of Christ's team despite any fears or misgivings that you might have. This does not mean that you are ignoring these fears or that they have disappeared, but it does mean that you are placing your trust in the power of the Lord's team to help you overcome them.

In the Gospel read at the Easter Vigil this past Holy Saturday, we were told by Saint Matthew that two disciples were walking to the tomb on that Easter morning when all of a sudden, in what must have seemed like an explosion, there was a "great earthquake." An angel descended from heaven, rolled back the stone of Christ's tomb and sat upon it. The once mighty Roman guards were shaken with fear and suddenly they "became like dead men." The angel of the Lord addressed the two disciples and through the evangelist addresses us here today with the words, "Do not be

afraid!" The angel invites them into the tomb and sends them forth to spread the Good News that Jesus was raised from the dead. These members of Christ's team were sent by the angel and charged with the words "Do not be afraid!" Along the road they encounter the Risen Christ who says to them, "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:1-10).

In today's readings, we see a great transformation that has taken place in Saint Peter in just a few days. On Holy Thursday, after Jesus was arrested, Peter was so afraid that he denied the Lord three times. Now, confronted by the "leaders, elders, and scribes . . . Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly class," Peter does not hesitate to proclaim that Jesus Christ the Nazorean has been "raised from the dead" and, moreover, that there "is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:1-12). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter is no longer paralyzed by fear, but does not back down in the face of opposition, even from the most powerful in the land. In the Gospel passage from Saint John, Peter's zeal for the Risen Lord is seen in his jumping out of the boat and into the water as soon as he recognized that the person standing on the shore was Jesus (John 21:1-14). He is no longer afraid.

This message not to be afraid is a recurring theme in the Scriptures. When an angel appeared to Zechariah while he was performing his priestly service of burning incense in the sanctuary of the Lord, “Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John, and you will have joy and gladness’” (Luke 1:12-14).

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit, “she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High’” (Luke 1:30-32).

When Joseph learned that his wife Mary had become pregnant before they lived together, an “angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been

conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

When Jesus was born in the manger in Bethlehem, “there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord’” (Luke 2:8-11).

Fast-forward to October 22, 1978 and during the inaugural homily of his pontificate, Saint John Paul II proclaimed to the millions watching his words, “brothers and sisters, do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power. Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ.”

My dear candidates for ordination, Rob, Aaron and Mark, I urge you to begin your ordained ministry by calling to mind those four powerful words of the Risen Christ with which Saint John Paul II began his Petrine ministry: “do not be afraid.” As members of Christ’s team, we will be given a life of true joy, but we will also have crosses to carry; still, we are told,

“do not be afraid.” On Christ’s team we may be ridiculed by secular society, laughed at by neighbors or even shunned by some family members; still, we are told, “do not be afraid.” Tonight, the Lord asks you to dedicate yourselves to serving His team, to tell others the Good News of His resurrection, to focus your eyes and hearts on following Christ, all the while remembering, “do not be afraid,” for the Holy Spirit will be with you, and your teammates, the communion of saints, will be helping you and will be praying for you.

The great earthquake of Christ’s resurrection should shake us to the core, jolting us out of our fears to turn forever to the Risen Lord. Hearing the biblical accounts calling us not to be afraid and opening our hearts to belief in the resurrection, we gather here at the Lord’s table, surrounded by a great “cloud of witnesses,” our teammates, “while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

It is my prayer for the three of you that you embrace your new team by living the life that is expected of you by Christ and His Church as deacons. I ask all of us who have already received the Sacrament of Holy Orders to recommit ourselves to be more effective in our ministry of service. I ask all of you, the lay Christian faithful, to pray for these men,

and indeed for all of the Church's ordained ministers, that we will not be afraid to give ourselves in loving service of God's team as we all strive to reach our common goal of sharing in the victory of the Resurrection.

May God give us this grace. Amen.