

Homily for Institution of the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte

Vigil of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

December 7, 2018

**Ss. Cyril and Methodius Seminary
Orchard Lake, MI**

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

Father Król, Reverend Fathers, Seminarians, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good for us to be here to celebrate this Mass during which these men will have the ministries of Lector and Acolyte conferred upon them, ministries which draw them into a fuller participation in the life of the Church as they continue their journey toward the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

The joy of our celebration this evening is heightened as we also celebrate the Vigil of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. The Blessed Virgin Mary, under this title, serves as the patroness for the United States, as well as many of the dioceses in this country, including my own diocese of Springfield in Illinois, home also to the two candidates present this evening, Piotr Kosk and Paweł Łuczak.

Above the high altar of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Springfield is a mosaic based on the famous painting *La Purísima Inmaculada*

Concepción, by the Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. Above the mosaic are the words: *Macula non est in te*, Latin for “there is no stain in you” (Songs 4:7), words which come from the Song of Songs and which point to the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was given the singular grace of being conceived without the stain of original sin.

This unique gift conferred upon our Blessed Mother must not be understood in isolation apart from the broader story of salvation history. In fact, it is only by situating this event in the overall plan to restore humanity back to right relationship with God that it finds its meaning and significance.

In the beginning, when God created man and woman, He created them to share in the blessed life of communion with God and one another. Through their disobedience to God, however, that communion was ruptured. Not willing to abandon mankind, the pinnacle of His creation, God, in a sheer act of goodness and love, set in motion a plan to restore that communion. In our first reading, we hear the first announcement of this plan when the Lord tells Satan: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel.” (Gen. 3:15) The woman of whom the Lord speaks is Mary, the New Eve. Her offspring is, of course, Jesus, the New

Adam, who will destroy the power of sin and bring restoration to the communion lost by the first Adam and the first Eve in the Garden.

From this passage, we see the important role Mary will play in salvation history. Since she would give birth to the Son of God, who would become like us in all things but sin, it was fitting that she, as the vessel through which He would come into the world, should likewise be without sin. We see from this, therefore, how this dogma of the Immaculate Conception is not exclusively about Mary, but rather, is to be understood “in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race.”¹

While Mary’s role in salvation history was singular and unique, her life demonstrates the pattern by which the Lord continues to work to bring souls into communion with Him and one another. Just as He chose a human being to bring salvation to mankind, He continues to make use of human beings to share in His work of redemption. All are called to work for the building up of the Kingdom through the common priesthood of the baptized, but among the faithful, He chooses some men to share specifically in his ministerial priesthood by acting in the person of Christ, the Head.

As with the Blessed Virgin Mary, those chosen to the responsibility of the ministerial priesthood must never view their role in isolation apart from

the One who has called them to this ministry. As St. Paul reminds us in the Second Reading, all of God's adopted children have been chosen "so that we might exist for the praise of *His* glory" (Eph. 1:12), not our own. How much more should that apply to those called to share more intimately in His ministry as priests? In that regard, we are invited to call that reality to mind each evening when we recite *Mary's Magnificat* at Evening Prayer, saying: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked with favor on His lowly servant." (Luke 1:46)

As you men are about to take the next step toward priestly ministry by receiving the ministries of Lector and Acolyte this evening, I strongly encourage you to learn from the example of Mary, always seeking to point to Christ through your life and ministry, never using it as a means to draw attention to yourselves. It was pride that brought about the rupture of communion with God and one another. Pridefulness in ministry will likewise distance us from God and from the people to whom we are called to serve, so we must receive the gift of our vocation with a profound sense of humility and gratitude.

In a similar manner, you must see what you are receiving tonight as a gift to be cherished. There can be the temptation to see the reception of these

ministries as just another set of hurdles to clear on the path toward the final goal of receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The Church, however, would like for you to recognize with all humility the significance of these steps as fundamental and essential parts of the ministry that you are preparing to receive in Holy Orders.

Pope St. Paul VI, in a letter describing the norms for the restored order of the permanent diaconate, explains the importance of these two ministries, helping us to see how they are more than just a box to be checked as you move forward. 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

In receiving the Ministry of Lector, you are being given 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 Him 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. Once again, we can turn to Mary, who, upon receiving the Good News, “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)

In receiving the Ministry of Acolyte, you are being given a privileged opportunity to prepare yourselves well for Holy Orders by becoming men who are more closely associated with the Eucharist. This will come about as you assist priests and deacons at the altar and as you distribute the Body and Blood of Christ to the faithful.

Once again, to exercise this ministry well is far more than just being proficient with the liturgical duties associated with being an acolyte. You are invited to strive to live more fully by the Lord’s sacrifice and to be molded more perfectly in its likeness. In other words, your life should become more like that of Christ’s who has come not to do His own will, but the will of the one who sent Him in a perfect sacrifice of obedience to the Father. As with the Ministry of Lector, the fruitfulness of your exercise of the Ministry of Acolyte will come from being more closely united to Christ through your Eucharistic piety. Personal prayer in the presence of the

Blessed Sacrament should have a prominent place in your spiritual life so that you will be constantly renewed in your love for our Eucharistic Lord, thus enabling you to perform your ministry of service at the altar with greater reverence and zeal.

As you prepare to receive the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte this evening, dear candidates, and as we all prepare to receive the Word made flesh in the Eucharist, let us seek to imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary in our faithfulness to God's Word as He communicates 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 in Word and sacrament with the world around us. May we imitate Mary's humility and purity of life as we cooperate in the Lord's work of bringing souls to the fullness of communion with God and all the saints in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Blessed Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854.

² *Dei Verbum*, no. 21.

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