

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES**  
**VIGIL OF THE TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**  
**50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE REINSTITUTION OF THE DIACONATE**  
**ARCHDIOCESE OF OMAHA**  
**CHRIST THE KING CHURCH, OMAHA, NEBRASKA**  
**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2018**

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of Pope Francis to the United States, I want to express His Holiness' spiritual closeness and paternal affection for all gathered here today, especially our permanent deacons and their families. I also want to express the Holy Father's profound gratitude for your diaconal ministry and service. I thank Archbishop Lucas for his kind invitation to be with you.

More than 50 years ago, Blessed Pope Paul VI issued general norms for restoring the permanent diaconate, recalling the role and functions of deacons in the life of the Church. Since that time, the permanent diaconate has flourished, particularly here in the United States, where nearly 18,500 permanent deacons carry out their three-fold diaconal *munera* of Word, Charity and Liturgy, which "represent a unity in service at the level of Divine Revelation: the ministry of the word leads to ministry at the altar, which in turn prompts transformation of life by the liturgy, resulting in charity." (Congregation for Clergy, Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, 22 February 1999, n. 39)

Pope Francis described the diaconal ministry in this way:

"There is no altar service, there is no liturgy that is not open to the poor, and there is no service to the poor that does not lead to the liturgy; there is no ecclesial vocation that is not of the family. This helps us to re-evaluate the diaconate today as an ecclesial vocation." (Pope Francis, Encounter with priests and consecrated persons in the Duomo, Milan, 25 March 2017)

His words are perfectly consistent with those of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* 29) which said: "For strengthened by sacramental grace, they (deacons) are at the service of the people of God in the ministry of the liturgy, the word and charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterium." We are grateful that God calls men for this vocation of service and communion for the good of the Church.

Deacons certainly carry out a ministry of the word. Our second reading spoke of the power of God's Word: *Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.* The word of God is not something of the past, but living and effective, intended for the men and women of our day. It is powerful and piercing, even if its ministers are sometimes fragile and weak, for its efficacy does not depend on human power but on the power of God. It discerns the reflections and thoughts of the heart, converting hearts and minds more deeply to Christ, helping people discover the path that leads toward abundance of life.

The question of fullness of life emerges in Jesus' discourse with the rich young man. He, like all of us, is concerned about happiness and eternal life. While he has kept the commandments, his heart's desire is still not satisfied. He is searching for something more.

Although he has worldly wealth, he cannot buy eternal life. Jesus looks upon him with great love and affection. He, the Word of God made Flesh, pierces the man's heart, discerning his thoughts and reflections. He sees his weakness: attachment to possessions. Jesus invites him to change – to sell all he has, give to the poor and to follow him.

The man's face falls. He is too attached to worldly possessions to follow Jesus unreservedly. That he is sad is a sign of hope; perhaps, one day he will realize what he is missing and decide to follow. On the other hand, his sadness is also our sadness. His love of God is not yet as great as his love for the world. His struggle is our struggle. What is our heart's greatest love and desire?

Pope Francis points out that in this Gospel, there are three gazes of Jesus. The first is his loving gaze upon the rich young man, even though he will be unable to follow. The second is Jesus' pensive gaze when he addresses his disciples, saying, "*How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!*" Finally, the Pope notes that Jesus has an encouraging gaze, reminding them that while they might lack the strength now, if they open their hearts to God, they will be able to follow and enter the Kingdom. This encouragement comes from the power of God: *For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.*

Yes, all things are possible for God – even our salvation. It is precisely because of the poverty of Christ that we have the possibility of salvation. In his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 2:5-8), Paul speaks of the self-emptying or *kenosis* of Christ Jesus. Rather than being attached to material things or power, Christ emptied Himself and became the slave of all, becoming obedient even unto death on a Cross. Jesus made a deliberate choice, as the beloved Son of the Father, to be obedient to His Father's will and to become poor to make us rich. The Son of Man came not to be served [*diakonethenai*] but to serve [*diakonesai*] and to give his life as a ransom for many (Luke 22:25-27). What was impossible for man became possible through Christ's poverty, through his self-emptying, through his *diakonia*. There is a Christological foundation for the diaconal ministry, which opens the Kingdom for believers. God calls some to share in the diaconal ministry.

Furthermore, God pours out his Spirit on his Church. In his First Letter to the Corinthians (12:4-6), St. Paul writes: "*Now there are a variety of gifts [charismaton] but the same Spirit; and there are a variety of services [diakonion] but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but the same God who activates them in everyone.*" Again, these gifts are given by God; they cannot be earned or bought, yet Paul says (v. 7) that "*to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*" In Ephesians (4:11-12), Paul speaks of the gifts of God which are given "*to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry [diakonias], for building up the Body of Christ.*"

In the diaconate, God has given a gift to his Church and to the world. Recently, Pope Francis suggested that the diaconal ministry must be lived as an integrating part of the work done by the Council to prepare the whole Church for a renewed apostolate in the world today" and that permanent deacons could be defined as "pioneers of the new civilization of love." Recalling that Pope John Paul II said that "service of diaconal ministry finds its identity in evangelizing," Pope Francis noted that "The Church finds in the permanent diaconate the expression and, at the same time, the impulse to become itself a visible sign of the *diakonia* of Christ the Servant in the history of mankind." (Pope Francis, Preface to *Il Diaconato nel pensiero di Papa Francesco*, 2017).

In my travels throughout the United States, I have seen how permanent deacons contribute to the vitality of the Church through their humble and generous service. The deacons I

have met have been able co-workers with their bishops, priests, and the laity in many dimensions of ecclesial life, especially apostolic works; sacramental preparation, including marriage preparation; hospital and prison chaplaincy; and in many other important ministries.

With generosity, permanent deacons have served as men of communion, modeling Christ the Servant, to those at the peripheries, especially to the poor. Devoted to the ministry of charity, deacons can readily bear the presence of Christ to those at the margins of society and the church. Deacons are men of communion, serving as intermediaries between the bishop and the people and between the people of God and individuals in need.

God calls each and everyone of us to serve him: some as bishops and priests, others as deacons, still others as married people, but all these vocations are built on the first which we first received in baptism – to be his disciple. Today, there is much talk about missionary discipleship. In this regard, we must all remember the words of Jesus in his dialogue with the rich young man, after he tells him to sell all his possessions: *Come, follow me!*

May we never go away sad, but heeding the call, discover happiness and eternal life!