

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY, ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES**  
**CONFERRAL OF THE MINISTRY OF ACOLYTE**  
**SACRED HEART SEMINARY,**  
**MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN**  
**OCTOBER 26, 2022**

My dear Brother Bishops and Priests,  
Dear friends in Christ & especially dear candidates for the ministry of Acolyte,

It is a joy to be with you for this celebration of Mass, during which the ministry of Acolyte will be conferred on four candidates for the priesthood, studying at this seminary.

The ministry of acolyte is associated with what we might call “service at the altar”. This explains the choice of the scripture readings of the Mass, which recall the Old Testament figure of Melchizedek, who brings gifts of bread and wine and who, as a “priest of God most high”, prefigures the priesthood of Christ. That theme is continued in the Gospel, where the full significance of that bread is unfolded. It is Christ Himself who is the true bread, the true nourishment for the weary traveler. The acolyte not only brings the gifts of bread and wine to the altar, but encounters there the Bread of Life.

In his Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini*, of January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Pope Francis reminds us that this ministry of acolyte is “based on the Sacrament of Baptism, [and] may be entrusted to all suitable faithful”. So, while the ministry you receive today may be, in the specific context of your seminary formation, a step towards priestly ministry; in the wider sense, it is a service within the Church, a service to God and to His holy people.

It is certainly true that the ministry of acolyte binds you more closely to the altar. But the service of the altar is not a service in isolation. Yes, we approach the altar to worship God, to render service to Him. The Gospel reminds us of what precisely we are doing at the altar and how we are ministers of the “living bread which comes down from heaven”. But service at the altar, service to God, is inseparable from service to the people of God. And moving closer to the altar does not mean moving away from the People of God. For our service at the altar is ordered towards the worship of God and the sanctification of His people (cfr. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #7).

And, I think this an important orientation for your priestly formation and eventually, we pray, for your priestly ministry. The entire life and ministry of the priest must be marked by this twin and complementary service: the service of God and of His people. And our worship at the altar always has this double aspect. The altar is the “axis mundi”, the *axis of the world*: it is where we gather to offer worship to God, to offer the perfect sacrifice of praise that is the Eucharistic celebration, to offer it as the work of the whole Church. The altar is the axis because the Church gathers around it and offers her common hymn of praise to God.

In simple words, during an address to priests, religious and seminarians in Lithuania a few years ago, Pope Francis makes this very point, emphasizing the two poles that animate the life of the priest. As he has

done on other occasions, he reminded those present that they are not clerical bureaucrats, and he told them:

“Dear Brothers and Sisters, if you do not wish to be bureaucrats, let me give you a word: closeness! ... Closeness to the Tabernacle, a heart-to-heart with the Lord. And closeness to the people.”

*(Address of Pope Francis, Kanusa, Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul (Lithuania) Sunday, 23 September 2018.)*

So, yes, my dear candidates, in a sense you move closer to the altar in undertaking this new ministry of acolyte; but it is a movement that must bring your hearts closer to God and closer to His people.

My prayer for you is that you will carry out this service with fidelity. Indeed, for all the seminarians here present, for my brother priests and bishops, for myself, this rite is renewed call to fidelity. As these young men take on a new ministry, it reminds us too of the ministries we respectively exercise in the Church and the call to exercise those offices with fidelity.

That fidelity is firstly a faithfulness to the Lord, who called us to this service and who must always be the animating force in all we do. It is also a fidelity to the people of God, whom we are called to serve and to accompany on their journey of faith. Finally, it is a fidelity to mission, to the mission of the Church, the mission of evangelization, of teaching, of sanctification.