



April 23, 2020

Cardinal Seán Message to Deacons

Video/Text:

One of the great joys of the Easter liturgies is hearing the readings from the Acts of the Apostles. I've always loved this book in the New Testament that has been called the Gospel of the Spirit. It's a continuation of Luke's gospel and shows us how the Risen Christ sent the Spirit to enliven the community, to guide us and to sanctify us. It's in the Acts of the Apostles that we see how the Spirit led the Church to ordain the seven, the magnificent seven deacons.

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I always say that there is nothing improvised in the New Testament. Isaiah, the prophet, speaks to us continuously about the suffering servant and although many of Jesus's contemporaries were looking for a strong military leader in the Messiah, the prophecies pointed to the humble carpenter of Nazareth who came to serve and not to be served.

We see at the heart of the celebration of the first Eucharist that Jesus gives us a dramatic gesture of the washing of the feet of his disciples. Here we see the image of Jesus, in his *kenosis*, his self-emptying, his humiliation and death.

The foot washing is an action of service for others, symbolic of the service he will render in laying down his life for others; that is why Jesus can claim that the foot washing is necessary if the disciples are to share in his heritage and that it will render the disciples clean: to have a part with Jesus through washing means to be part of that self-giving love which will bring Jesus' life to an end, symbolically anticipated by the foot washing.

Furthermore, those who would be leaders in the community of disciples are to be identified by their own self-sacrificing love in imitation of that self-emptying of Christ. Those who have a share in the apostolic ministry freely accept this aspect of Christ's identity as part of their own. Ministry is centered on the Eucharist: it flows from the minister's participation in Christ's own sacrifice of himself, celebrated within the form of a sacred Memorial meal. The diaconia of apostolic ministry is Eucharistic, a breaking and sharing of one's life for the building up of the Body in memory of Christ.

So, the washing of the feet at the Last Supper is a preview of coming attractions. It speaks to us about Jesus's death, but it also underscores to servant leadership that he wants to communicate to his disciples. This simple gesture of loving service points to the diaconate.

One of the great achievements of the second Vatican Council was to lift up for us the order of deacons and the treasures that this vocation can bring to our Church. As a young priest working with immigrants where we had a terrible shortage of priests, I asked permission from Cardinal Hickey to begin a diaconate training program in Spanish for the archdiocese of Washington. It afforded me the opportunity to learn so much about this new vocation in the Church which restored the diaconate of the early Church. I saw up close the sacrifices that the candidates and their wives made to be part of the formation, I saw the generosity in their commitment to the service of the community of faith, I saw the impact that their ministry had on so many communities. Being part of that diaconate training program has made me a true believer in the permanent diaconate.

That is why I have expanded our diaconate program at a time when other bishops are reducing theirs. I have seen up close all the good that can be accomplished through the training of candidates and their wives and the extraordinary ministry that is a result of the order of deacons in the Church.

Just as the diaconate is born from the work of the Spirit guiding the Church, the same Spirit will continue to guide the diaconate in the church of the 21st century, making ever more visible the servanthood of Christ present in our Church.

In these strange times in which we live, the traditional forms of ministry are all challenged by the circumstances imposed upon us by the pandemic.

Ironically enough, social distancing is actually an expression of concern for the common good and the welfare of the most vulnerable. At the same time, it makes it difficult for us to gather as a people and to interact with the freedom with which we have become accustomed. More than ever, the vocation of the deacon is crucial for the Church's response. The deacon is ordained to evangelize, but especially by serving the poor and by being a healer in a divided world. We need deacons who can be community builders and can inspire, motivate, and encourage our parishioners. The deacon is a visible link between the love and worship of God and the love and care of neighbor. The married deacon operates within the context of family and work, bringing a special sensitivity to such issues as the dignity of marriage and the family. The presence of our deacons in hospitals, prisons, diocesan offices and special ministries, in addition to the invaluable work that is carried on in the parish communities, has been an extraordinary grace for our local Church. The fact that many deacons come from ethnic communities that lack sufficient numbers of priests is also a very important contribution to the life and ministries of the Archdiocese.

As I always raise with the priest, the basis for our ministry is always our interior life, our friendship with the Risen Lord. That is the source of our motivation and strength to be able to share with others the relationship that we have cultivated by a life of prayer and sacraments.

Therefore, it is crucial to have a rule of life, a plan of action, to maintain a careful balance in our life and to make sure that each day there is time and space for God. Without a plan, without discipline, the life of prayer can be reduced to sporadic

attempts that end in fits and starts. It is only rule of life that will allow us to progress on the path to holiness.

The present crisis means that so many people have lost loved ones and have been unable to gather for a wake or a funeral mass. I am grateful for the deacons who have been doing graveside services. I would urge the deacon community to begin to plan for a time when we can reopen our churches and reach out to those who lost loved ones during this period of the lockdown. We need a special bereavement ministry to help these families whose loved ones often died alone and who did not have the benefit of the Eucharist celebrated in the community. It will be an important opportunity to reconnect with our parishioners. We will need our deacons to help in this much-needed ministry.

We are also painfully aware of the fact that many people are losing their gainful employment, and that some of our deacons and their family members may well lose their jobs and economic security. We must try to monitor these situations and look for ways to be helpful.

It is hard to understand the predicament our world is in. There will be much suffering and deprivation. The strong faith and witness of our deacons will be a great source of consolation for our faith communities and society. Hence, the ever heightened urgency to cultivate the interior life that will generate the strength and serenity that is needed to face the challenges ahead.

Our parishes and schools will find themselves in very challenging economic situations that will require painful and drastic decisions. In the midst of all of this pain, the deacon must be a man of healing and of hope.

We must never become so overwhelmed by our lack of material resources that we lose sight of our mission which is to announce the Good News that Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death for us, that we are called to be his disciples. The deacons will need to work closely with their priests and parish leaders to plan for future fraught with uncertainties. We must do this with the spirit of faith, hope in God's loving Providence and courage to act boldly to ensure that we can be faithful to our mission.

From the time of the Acts of the Apostles, the deacons have been involved in ethnic ministries. A sizable percentage of the Catholics of the archdiocese are immigrants. We have been and always will be an immigrant church. Our immigrants face many challenges, particularly those who are here without the benefit of documents.

We must be sensitive to the horrendous situations they find themselves in, and we must look for ways to be present to them and help them.

Let me say a word of gratitude to the wives and families of our deacons who lovingly support our deacons and indeed participate in their ministry and service in countless ways. Your generosity and sacrifices are a source of blessings for our faith community and we all owe you a great debt of gratitude.

The Easter season proclaims that the Cross leads to the Resurrection. Our God is so good and so loving, he can always bring good out of evil. Out of the pain and suffering of this pandemic, our world will emerge a better place if the present suffering leads us to deeper conversion and truly to be a people of loving service, animated by the joy of the Gospel and a deep sense of solidarity and connectedness with suffering humanity. The fact that the whole world is suffering this together may help us to realize, as Pope Francis says, that this planet is our common home.

We must learn to live here together in love and in peace. In these challenging times our deacons have a heightened role, modeling and discipleship of healing and service.

Know that you and your families are in my prayers each day. May the presence of the Risen Lord in your hearts give you the grace and strength for the task ahead.