

## **Transitional deacons are instruments of Christ and the Church**

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(Given at the Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo, ND)

In our Gospel reading for today, we hear Jesus speak to His apostles and to His disciples, those with whom He is most intimate. He reminds them that their call comes from Him, not from themselves. He calls them friends, and He calls them into deeper intimacy with Him. “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love” (John 15:9). My dearest sons, as you are prepared to be ordained deacons today, as transitional deacons moving toward the priesthood, those are important words for you to pray and reflect upon. God calls you, and you are called to follow Him no matter what the cost. As He has laid down his life for you, you are called to lay down your life for Christ and His Church. In the diaconal ministry, you will be called to respond, to live and to serve the ministry of the word, the ministry of the altar, and the ministry of charity. You will be called to be a servant. You will be called to give yourselves totally and entirely of your own free will to Christ and to the Church.

We see in the first reading from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, the call given to him as a prophet. The Lord speaks to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you” (Jer 1:5). Jason and Luke, you must hear those words within your own hearts. The Lord knew you before you were even born. As you formed and developed in your mother's womb, it was God who dedicated you. Jeremiah is worried about his usefulness. It is the Lord who calls him. “‘Have no fear...because I am with you to deliver you,’ says the Lord” (Jer.1:8).

My sons, it is important for you whenever you are fearful or anxious to turn to the God who has called you. It is important for you to turn to the Father and His love for you. It is precisely in that love that you will experience courage and confidence to trust in God and to carry on His work. Turn to Him and depend upon Him. It is precisely His work, not your work, with which you are entrusted. The Lord assures Jeremiah, and assures you today, that if you truly listen, if you have humility and surrender, “I (will) place my words in your mouth” (Jer 1:9). That is a tremendous promise given to us by our God. In your ministry of preaching, you must have that confidence. In your ministry of service and charity, you must have confidence in God to serve Him no matter what the cost.

In the second reading, Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we hear more fully about preaching. "We are not discouraged...not acting deceitfully or falsifying the word of God, but by the open declaration of the truth (we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God)" (2 Cor 4:2). My sons, listen to those words carefully. Although those words were spoken almost 2000 years ago, they are still valid even today, for you will be preaching in a world that still does not accept Jesus Christ or the Gospel. Discouragement, acting deceitfully, and falsifying the word of God are great temptations today, especially in preaching. Be not afraid to preach the truth of the Gospel. Be not afraid to preach Jesus Christ as Lord and the only Savior of the world. Be not afraid to promote the dignity of the human person and the culture of life. Be not afraid to always speak the truth in charity, for that is the only way people will be drawn to Christ.

Always remember discouragement, deceitfulness, and falsifying the word of God is the work of the Evil One. It is not of God. As deacons, as priests, and as bishop, we can never, ever falsify the word of God or condone evil. We must help people to recognize what is evil through our preaching and call them to the fullness of virtue, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We must call them to holiness. That means that you do not preach yourselves. As St. Paul tells us, we preach "Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:5). He is the one who is Lord, who brings salvation to the world, the forgiveness of our sins, and eternal life. You are only instruments of Christ and of the Church. "Let light shine out of darkness" (2 Cor 4:6). You, my sons, must be that light for the Church of Fargo and for the universal Church and world.

Once again St. Paul reminds us that all of this is God's work, not your work. Your task is to cooperate and to surrender to Him. Listen carefully to his words, "we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). You will only be disillusioned if you depend upon yourself. You will be alone, isolated and lonely, if you depend upon yourself, and think it is your power. You will become prideful and arrogant if you believe that it is your power. You essentially will have a rebellious heart as Adam and Eve did in the garden. My dearest sons, recognize the greatness of our God. It is His work. When we cooperate with Him, it is His power and His authority working through us that we bring to others. We are mere servants of our Lord.

As ministers of the altar you will be involved in the preparation of the gifts and especially of the cup and the distribution of the most precious blood. It is important for you to understand the significance and sign and your association with the blood of Christ; that just as He has given His life for us, you

are called to give your life for those you serve. Yes, that may mean that you, as all who are ordained, may be called to martyrdom.

Today the universal Church on her calendar remembers recent martyrs from the Cristero uprising in Mexico between 1915 and 1937. The Church calendar remembers today Cristóbal Magallanes and his companions: their motto was “Long live Christ the King and the Virgin of Guadalupe.” Many priests, deacons, and laity, because they proclaimed their Catholic faith and lived it, and because it was banned in Mexico, shed their blood. They were hung and shot and dragged through the streets. We too are called to that same witness of obedience. We are called to the total gift of self to Christ, no matter what the cost. As ministers of Christ you will be called to do the will of the Father from the heart. You will be called to obedience to the Father, as Christ was obedient to the Father.

Today you will make a lifetime commitment and promise to celibacy. Celibacy is that witness, that total gift of self, which you give to God and to the Church. The Church asks you to live a life of celibacy in order to proclaim the kingdom of God, to be a sign of pastoral charity and spiritual fruitfulness. My sons, meditate upon the gift of celibacy. It is a gift. Once again, it is not your work, but a gift to be received. Pray daily for the grace of celibacy, for the grace of chastity, for the grace of purity of heart, of mind, of soul and body. Seek that grace from God, because you cannot do it on your own. When you face temptations that you will see whenever you watch television, that you will see whenever you pass billboards, that you will experience driving, turn those temptations over to the Lord and seek purity. The world today will hold up many challenges to you, but it is only through seeking that purity that is rooted in Christ that you will be able to live celibacy. At the heart of celibacy is spiritual fatherhood. You will be fathers of the people you care for, of the people entrusted to your pastoral care. As deacons and priests, there is an element of fatherhood that you will receive by the fruitfulness of your ministry, by how well you love those entrusted to your care. Cling to Christ, my sons, with undivided hearts. Cling to Him who is your friend.

In the prayer of consecration today I will pray that the Spirit will come upon you, that you may abound in every Gospel virtue, and unfeigned love, concern for the poor and the sick. Pray that the Spirit will give you “unassuming authority, the purity of innocence and the observance of spiritual discipline” (Rites of Ordination). Listen to those words carefully. That is the Church's prayer for you and that is what God is accomplishing in you today. Pray for receptivity to those gifts. Pray to be like Mary, whose heart was filled with receptivity, whose heart was filled with obedience to the word, whose heart was filled with love. Turn to her who is your mother, your spiritual mother, who will always lead you to Jesus and help you to live a holy and virtuous life.

Today my prayer for you, as your Bishop, is that as you are ordained deacons, and as you look forward to the priesthood, that each day you will grow in deeper intimacy with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. My prayer for you is that you will grow in a deeper union and love with the Trinity and, that in that unity and in that love, you will be ministers of the word who proclaim the truth with charity and who preach Jesus Christ alone; that you will be ministers of the altar, willing to lay down your lives for Christ and the Church, obedient no matter what the cost, giving yourself completely to Christ; and that you will be ministers of charity, servants of all, no matter who the person may be, no matter who turns to you for help, that in your service you will have the heart of Christ and the love of Christ for all peoples. My prayer for you is that the words of Jesus in today's Gospel may be fulfilled in your lives each day. "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love" (John 15:9).