**Remarks by Archbishop Aquila**

Deacon ConvocationSt. John Vianney Refectory

February 28, 2015

It is a blessing for me to be with you deacons this morning and to experience the dedication you have to your vocation to service within the Church.

When he was speaking to Timothy about the role of deacons in the early Church, St. Paul said, “those who serve well as deacons gain good standing and much confidence in their faith in Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 3:13).

It is my desire to see every one of you grow in your faith in Jesus Christ through your ministry of *diakonia* (service) in the Church. In particular, I would like to see your awareness and understanding of your role in the liturgy deepen, so that you will be able to carry it out with serenity and a prayerful disposition. And so, I will dedicate my remarks today to the role of the deacon in the liturgy, focusing first on the origins of your vocation and the implications that has for the way you carry out your role, and then examining the spiritual meaning of the various actions you perform in the liturgy.

To understand the nature of the diconate and the liturgical role given to you, it is necessary to recall the divine origin of your vocation. St. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12: 11 that the Holy Spirit is the source of all ministries in the Church and that each of them plays its own unique role. After naming the various gifts of the Spirit, he says, “But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.”

When we look at the Apostles’ decision to select the first deacons in the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6), we see that the seven men chosen were “reputable” and “filled with the Spirit and wisdom.” The first deacons were then presented to the Apostles, “who prayed and laid hands on them.”

As you approach your ministry with the Word, Sacraments and Charity, it is crucial that you begin by seeking the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts. He is the source of your ministry and only He can prepare you to effectively live out your vocation. At a practical level, you should make it a habit to pray to the Holy Spirit for his gifts before you exercise your ministry, especially before you participate in the Sacred Liturgy.

In his book *The Deacon and the Liturgy: A Search for Identity,*Msgr. James Moroney paints a beautiful picture of the disposition you should be cultivating. He writes, “When the deacon comes to serve, he must empty himself from all selfish concerns. He must see himself as servant of the liturgy and never its master. He must minister to the priest and to the altar with the humility of him whose very body and blood were offered on the altar of the cross.”

This is even more the case when it is a liturgy that I am presiding over. As the Archbishop, I am the chief steward of the Mysteries of God, which means that I am the moderator, promoter, and guardian of the whole liturgical life of the Church in the Archdiocese of Denver.

When I am presiding over the Eucharist, together with priests, deacons, and the people taking part, the mystery of the Church is revealed. For this reason, the solemn celebration of these Masses must be an example for the entire archdiocese.

In his 1987 Address to Deacons in Detroit, Pope Saint John Paul II underscored that as ministers of the altar “you must be*steeped in the spirit of the liturgy*, and be convinced above all that it is ‘the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed and at the same time the source from which all her power flows’ (Cfr. *[Sacrosanctum Concilium](http://localhost/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)*, 10). You are called to discharge your office with the dignity and reverence befitting the liturgy, which the Council powerfully describes as being “above all, the worship of the divine majesty” (*Ibid*. 33).

I say this to remind you to take your preparation for your role of service in the liturgy seriously, not to scare you. You don’t need to be nervous. I won’t excommunicate you if you do something wrong. Either the emcee or I will merely point out the mistake so you can fix it next time.

At this point, I would like to take some time to reflect on three important moments in the Eucharistic liturgy when deacons play a significant but often underappreciated role. I pray that learning or recalling the importance of your role of service will revivify your participation in the liturgy.

The three instances I am going to focus on are tied to your threefold ministry of the Word, charity and liturgy (*Lumen Gentium*, 29).

The first diaconal action is the procession with the Book of the Gospels and the proclamation of the Gospel. Clearly, this is linked with your ministry of the Word.

The Acts of the Apostles describes the first seven deacons as being chosen “to serve at tables.” However, we see later in Acts that Stephen and Philip dedicated themselves to more than just distributing food to widows and the poor. Indeed, we hear about Stephen’s discourse defending the faith in the synagogue in Jerusalem and about Philip’s teaching ministry in Samaria.

When you were ordained, the bishop gave you the book of the Gospels and declared, “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become.” You have a great responsibility to proclaim the Truth who sets us free to the faithful, to those who are fallen away, to the indifferent and to those who have never heard the Good News. In the context of the Mass, it is therefore particularly important for you to read the Word of God with clarity, conviction born from your life of prayer, and the solemnity appropriate to the occasion.

Your preaching on the Word of God must also be approached with an awareness of the important ministry you have been given. You must empty yourself of all your worldly wisdom so that you are filled only with the wisdom of God.

Msgr. Moroney explains it this way: “He must decrease so that the Word of God might take root in him and those who hear his voice may hear not him, but Christ Jesus who lives in him.”

The next moment in the liturgy that I would like to examine is the proclamation of the Intercessory Prayers, which is connected to your ministry of charity.

At this moment in the liturgy, your role is “to ‘express the needs and desires of the Christian communities’ and to be ‘a driving force for service, or *diakonia*,’ which is an essential part of the mission of the Church” (*Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons,* 5).

Just as you are called to be a herald of the Gospel, you are also called to bring “the poor to the Church and the Church to the poor.” The *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the U.S.* speaks of the deacon’s role in proclaiming the Intercessory Prayers as articulating “the Church’s concern for justice by being a driving force in addressing the injustices among God’s people. He thus symbolizes in his roles the grounding of the Church’s life in the Eucharist and the mission of the Church in her loving service of the needy” (#37).

In order to carry out this role effectively, your ministry of charity must put you in touch with the struggles of the people in your parish. The faithful need to know that you are trustworthy, compassionate person that they can approach. The poor and orphans must find in you a friend and father, a refuge after the model of Jesus Christ.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about your participation in the Eucharistic liturgy as the one who prepares the altar with the gifts of the faithful. This is the moment tied to your ministry through the liturgy.

One of the earliest accounts we have of the deacon’s role in the liturgy comes from St. Justin’s *Apologies* (1, 65, 3-5), which was written in the 2nd Century. He explains that:

“There is brought to him who presides over the assembly of the brethren, some bread and a cup of water and wine mixed … once the prayers and giving of thanks are over, all of the people present express their assent by replying Amen … When the president of the assembly has finished the prayer of thanksgiving (eucharist) and all the people have made their response, those among us who are called deacons give to each of those present to share in the bread and in the wine mixed with water over which has been said the prayer of thanksgiving (eucharist), and they carry it to those who are absent.”

At this moment, the gifts you are placing on the altar represent the joys, sufferings, fears, strengths, and weaknesses of the faithful. Through your liturgical ministry you assist both me as bishop and the priests in sanctifying the whole Christian community by connecting their gifts and sacrifices to the wellspring of grace found in the Eucharist.

“Thus, in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the deacon does not celebrate the mystery: rather, he effectively represents on the one hand, the people of God and, specifically, helps them to unite their lives to the offering of Christ; while on the other, in the name of Christ himself, he helps the Church to participate in the fruits of that sacrifice” (*Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, 28, Congregation for the Clergy, 1998).

When the Church decided at the Second Vatican Council to permanently reestablish the diaconate as a rank of the hierarchy, it intended to reinforce her efforts to serve as Christ did. Your role within the Church is particularly important as society become increasingly distant from God and more indifferent toward the faith.

For this reason, the Congregation for Clergy’s *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* says, “the deacon’s ministry of service is linked with the missionary dimension of the Church: the missionary efforts of the deacon will embrace the ministry of the word, the liturgy, and works of charity which, in their turn, are carried into daily life. Mission includes witness to Christ in a secular profession or occupation” (no. 27).

Although I have focused primarily on the liturgy today, I encourage you to remember that your ministry with the Word through catechesis and your ministry of charity are key components of the New Evangelization.

You are called to participate in the New Evangelization by looking for ways to bring your ministry to modern society with renewed enthusiasm, using new methods and new expressions.

I would like to close my remarks by sharing a quote with you from St. John Paul II’s meeting with deacons during the Jubilee Year 2000 in Rome.

“Dear deacons, perhaps some of you are tired because of the burden of your duties, because of frustration due to unsuccessful apostolic projects, because many misunderstand you. Do not lose heart! Throw yourselves into Christ's arms: he will refresh you. May this be your Jubilee: a pilgrimage of conversion to Jesus.”

I pray that you too will experience this Lent as a time of conversion and renewal of your ministry! May God bless you!