

Remarks by Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila  
Deacon Convocation  
March 18, 2017  
9:30 a.m. — 10: 15 a.m.  
St. John Paul II Center, Refectory

---

“This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”<sup>1</sup> This was the calling card of the Church in the first centuries, as our spiritual predecessors lived out their faith in a pagan world whose culture was self-indulgent – the opposite of love. Jesus reminded his disciples that they were to love one another, and that this was to be their identification: in how they loved as he loved.

This might sound like a joke, but it is not... This past week in New York City a cardinal, a rabbi and a Mormon elder got together for an hour-long discussion on marriage.

The gathering included Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik and Elder David Bednar to examine how people of faith can support marriage in an increasingly hostile culture. In response to a question about how we can respond to the growth of secularization, Rabbi Soloveichik said, “I’m not so sure that we are facing something new as we are facing something rather ancient: the rebirth of paganism, which had different ideas about marriage and sexuality.” Cardinal Dolan agreed with his comment and said a remedy to this neo-pagan culture can be found in the witness offered by people of faith, particularly families.

I tell you this anecdote because this morning’s talk will be focused on answering the question: *How can the pastoral ministry of deacons effectively respond to the current culture?*

To be effective in a neo-pagan culture that eventually breaks hearts and ruins lives, I believe that we must minister in the same way the early Church did, making charity the “leading edge” of diaconal ministry and of our evangelization efforts.

Just as every good military general surveys the battlefield before launching into combat, it’s important for us to do the same before we discuss how a “charity first”

---

<sup>1</sup> John 13:35, NABRE.

approach impacts your threefold role as ministers of God's Word, the Liturgy and Charity.

In that vein, I would like to provide some definition to the idea of a neo-pagan culture that shows why charity must be the predominant marker of our initial outreach. A pagan culture in the classical use of the term was one that revolved around the worship of many gods, rather than one God. When I use the term "neo-pagan," I am referring to how the predominant culture has found new gods: self-centeredness ("it's all about me"), nature, sex, and material possessions, just to name a few.

Many of you already know this from your ministry in the parishes, hospitals, prisons and as marriage advocates. You see the impact of a culture that is abandoning God and has no use for God.

The place where this is most apparent is in the breakdown of the family that has been occurring for the last few decades. In its wake, one can find broken hearts, confusion, spiritual atrophy and spiritual starvation. Without the moral foundation created by strong families, society loses its moorings and begins drifting -- people are treated as disposable, the family is re-definable, and as we are seeing in the whole discussion around transgenderism, is considered something that can be changed.

Friends are sharing with me now how their grandchildren now, in some of the secular universities they attend are required to pick from over 30 genders, what their gender is every year because gender is so fluid.

Drilling down a bit deeper, there are two important more recent cultural trends that are closely tied to this breakdown and are therefore important to highlight. The first is that fewer and fewer young people are getting married. I know this isn't news to many of you, but the latest statistics show us the impact.

According to a 2016 Gallup report, millennials – who make up the largest generation since the Baby Boomers – are "clearly delaying marriage longer than any generation before them, in spite of evidence suggesting that many millennials

intend to marry at some point.” Even with their good intention of marrying some day, the reality is that 59% of millennials are single or have never been married.<sup>2</sup>

Marriage and having children used to be what brought people back to the practice of their faith. The sacrificial demands of parenting and married life helped people confront the reality that they are not able to do everything on their own, but this is not so anymore.

The second trend that is worth noting is that the next generation of Americans appears to be even more self-centered. Numerous studies show that millennials tend to be more narcissistic than previous generations, based on their responses to the Narcissistic Personality Inventory.<sup>3</sup>

This is fueled by the isolating tendencies of personalized technology and marketing efforts as well. A few weeks ago, for example, the Wall Street Journal pointed out a growing movement among teens called “live chilling,” in which they use various apps like Houseparty or Kik to socialize digitally instead of in person.<sup>4</sup>

Another example of this is with our own Camp Wojtyla in which for an entire week, all IT, cell phones, everything, is taken away from young people who range in age from junior high to high school. They say one of the most important things they learn besides about their faith is how to communicate with one another. For some of them, they have told some of our leaders, it is the first time they have had any face to face conversation for that length of time, or have gone that long without a cell phone or computer.

These are trends in the broader society in which we all live in and to which we are not immune. At the same time, it’s important to paint the whole picture. I also see tremendous hope in the number of young families in parishes, many of whom have been reached and formed by FOCUS, the Augustine Institute or ecclesial movements like the Neocatechumenal Way, Focolare, the Christian Catholic Family Movement and Christian Life Movement.

This is good news, and we must continue to thoroughly prepare couples for marriage, as well as offer tangible support to them after they are married. The

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/191462/gallup-analysis-millennials-marriage-family.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1948550609355719>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-generation-z-live-chilling-replaces-hanging-out-in-person-1487519134>

family founded upon marriage is so important because it is the birthplace of virtues, values and vocations. This sanctuary of life and love is being attacked and often, too often left unsupported.

## Ministers of Charity

At this point I'd like to delve into how your threefold ministry as deacons is impacted by these realities, beginning with your role as ministers of charity.

You might wonder, 'Why should we begin with charity?' The answer is that charity stands at the heart of the diaconate. As I mentioned earlier, it is the key for opening hearts to the Gospel.

Blessed Paul VI explained in his apostolic letter *Ad Pascendum*, the diaconate is "a driving force for the Church's *diakonia* and a sacrament of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, 'who came not to be served but to serve.'"<sup>5</sup> Further, we know from the First Letter of John that "God is love."<sup>6</sup> Given these two facts, it follows that charity must be at the heart of the diaconate. Jesus Himself tells us to "love one another as I have loved you. No greater love has one than to lay down one's life for one's friend."

There is also a less theological reason for making charity the primary characteristic of your initial encounter with people. Considering the world we live in, many of the people you encounter will be wounded, especially if they have grown up on society's peripheries. If someone is wounded and has had very little exposure to love and to the truth, a hand extended in love is exactly what is needed most. Think, for example, of the story of the Good Samaritan. That man who was beaten by robbers and left for dead is like so many people today. He needed his wounds tended, he needed to be clothed and taken to safety. He was not ready to hear an apologetics argument or a catechesis on the 10 Commandments or the Beatitudes. What was most important for him was the loving outreach of the Samaritan who reached out to him and took care of him.

More often than not, the first step in announcing the Gospel to someone is what Pope Francis calls "the apostolate of the ear."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Ad Pascendum*, August 15, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:8, NABRE.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, p.

The Pope first alludes to this idea when he ponders how relativism has led more people to consult fortune tellers and psychics because they are desperately seeking and searching for something, for the truth. He states, “Mostly, people are looking for someone to listen to them – someone willing to grant them time, to listen to their dramas and difficulties. This is what I call the ‘apostolate of the ear,’ and it is important. Very important.” All of us know how important it is to be listened to; it is essential in human relationships.

The famous story of the early Church deacon St. Lawrence also offers some guidance on bringing the ministry of charity to those who are on the periphery.. When the Roman Emperor Valerian began persecuting Christians, he demanded that St. Lawrence bring him all the treasures of the Church, which were rumored to consist of large sums of money, silver and gold secreted away in the hills of Rome.

But Lawrence spent three days going through Rome’s streets searching for those in need of food, clothing and medical care – many of whom he already knew from his charitable work. Once the poor were gathered together, St. Lawrence brought them to Valerian and said, “here is the treasure of the Church.” Days later, St. Lawrence, as we all know, was executed by order of the emperor, but his witness inspired the people of Rome so much that a strong devotion to “San Lorenzo” continues to this day.<sup>8</sup>

The testimony of St. Lawrence and that of the early Church are evidence that charity will outlast the trials of persecution and truly reach hearts for Christ.

It is the same type of charity that our world cries out for today. When I look at the acts of charity done by Christ in the City with the homeless, or the acts of charity done by families who have shared with me how when the mother is packing the lunches, she packs 20 extra to be distributed to the homeless as they are begging at the various corners.... All of us see the need for charity and it is in your diaconal ministry that you can reach out to others through that ministry of charity.

## **Ministers of the Word**

---

<sup>8</sup> Owen Cummings, *Saintly Deacons*, cf. pp. 19-20.

With the understanding that charity should be the primary characteristic of your initial encounter with people, I will now turn to your role as ministers of the Word. The example of the first deacons makes clear that they were men immersed in charitable activity, which included the greatest work of charity, inviting others to encounter Jesus Christ.

The deacon-scholar Owen Cummings describes in his analysis of Acts 6 – which recounts the origin of the diaconate – how the service of deacons was likely understood to include more than materially supporting the Greek-speaking widows. Deacon Cummings writes:

What does *diakonein*/serving at table mean in this context? The normal understanding has been that it has to do with food and the necessities of life, “serving at table.” There are problems with this. First, in Luke’s use of the word, *diakonia*/ministry has to do primarily with the church’s preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus ... It does *not* have to do with waiting table, serving food like a waiter. Second, the Greek text does not actually say “serving *at* table,” but “serving table.” So what’s the difference? In all probability the Twelve were not talking about serving food *at* table, but rather, *ministering the word* in the Greek language to those Greek-speaking widows gathered at their tables.<sup>9</sup>

We see this borne out later in Acts when the author recounts how 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.

In other words, the ministry of the Word has its roots in charity. Sharing the Word of God is an encounter and an act of charity.

It is essential for you as deacons to know and to love the Word of God, to have personally encountered, in a particular way for you, Jesus’ love for you. If you have not had that personal encounter with the Word, you will never be able to pass that on in charity.

As deacons, you are called to find the spiritual sustenance within to carry out this work of charity through your daily praying of the Liturgy of the Hours and the

---

<sup>9</sup> Cummings, *Saintly Deacons*, pgs. 9-10.

prayerful reading, *Lexio Divina*, of the sacred Scriptures. These fountains of grace should be the lifeblood that sustains you in bringing the Word of God to others.

Pope Benedict XVI was once addressing the deacons of Rome and was asked by one of them about how they could be more “incisively present” in the diocese. He stated:

On this occasion a small experience noted by Paul VI springs to mind ... Every day of the (Second Vatican) Council the Gospel was enthroned. The Pontiff once told the masters of ceremonies that he himself would like to be the one who enthroned the Gospel. They said: ‘No, this is a task for deacons and not for the Pope, the Supreme Pontiff, or the Bishops.’ He noted in his diary: ‘But I am also a deacon, I am still a deacon, and I too would like to exercise my diaconal ministry by enthroning the Word of God.’ Thus, this concerns us all. Priests remain deacons and deacons clarify this diaconal dimension of our ministry in the Church and in the world. The liturgical enthronement of the Word of God every day during the Council was always an act of great importance: it told us who was the true Lord of that Assembly, it told us that the Word of God is on the throne and that we exercise the ministry to listen to and interpret this Word in order to offer it to others. To enthrone the Word of God, the living Word or Christ, in the world underlies the meaning of all we do.” (...Listen to the words of Pope Benedict: to “enthroned the Word of God, the living Word of Christ in the world underlies the meaning of all we do.” He goes on to state...) May it truly be he who governs our personal life and our life in the parishes.<sup>10</sup>

In your ministry as servants of the Word of God, through your preaching and witness, I would like to echo Benedict XVI’s encouragement. I urge you to continually seek to enthrone Jesus Christ the Word in your hearts, your families and your parishes.

But the question remains: How should you as ministers of the Word respond to the current culture?

---

<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with Parish Priests and the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome, Feb. 7, 2008. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080207\\_clergy-rome.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080207_clergy-rome.html)

When he spoke to deacons as part of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of availability. He said: “One who serves is not a slave to his own agenda, but ever ready to deal with the unexpected, ever available to his brothers and sisters and ever open to God’s constant surprises. ... Dear deacons, if you show that you are available to others, your ministry will not be self-serving, but evangelically fruitful.”<sup>11</sup>

St. Francis of Assisi, who was a deacon during a period of cultural upheaval provides us with a good model for how to bring the Word of God into such a world. St. Francis was often regarded as a “holy fool,” and we must not be afraid to appear that way for the sake of bringing the Gospel to the spiritually and materially poor.

As the English scholar Father John Saward put it, “In a world gone mad the guardian of truth is invariably dismissed as a raving lunatic.”<sup>12</sup> You must not be afraid to proclaim the Gospel in season and out of season.

Certainly there will be those in our culture who will reject you, those who will write you off, those who will think you are crazy or a raving lunatic because you believe in Jesus Christ, but it is precisely in that moment of transformation in one’s life, in his or her encounter with Jesus Christ, that life is changed forever. And in that experience one then goes out on mission as Jesus went out on mission. We too are called, and you are called as deacons to share in that mission in proclaiming the Word and inviting others, even on the peripheries, to encounter Jesus.

### **Ministers of the Liturgy**

Understanding how the deacon’s role within the Liturgy can serve people today requires remembering the poverty that is present in contemporary culture when it comes to the spiritual realm.

Helping people experience truly beautiful and spiritually rich liturgy is part of the deacon’s ministry of charity. By faithfully and reverently fulfilling your role in the Liturgy, you are able to connect people with the Truth of the Word of God and bring them to the source of the greatest charity in history: Jesus Christ in his one sacrifice, in his flesh and in his blood.

---

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, Jubilee for Deacons, May 29, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, Fr. John Saward, p. 1, 1980.



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.’ 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.”<sup>13</sup>

The deacon’s participation in the Liturgy also helps the faithful encounter the transcendent purpose for which they were created. Pope Francis describes this in his encyclical on faith, *Lumen Fidei*, where he writes:

On the one hand, there is the dimension of history: the Eucharist is an act of remembrance, a making present of the mystery in which the past, as an event of death and resurrection, demonstrates its ability to open up a future, to foreshadow ultimate fulfilment. The liturgy reminds us of this by its repetition of the word *hodie*, the “today” of the mysteries of salvation. On the other hand, we also find the dimension which leads from the visible world to the invisible. In the Eucharist we learn to see the heights and depths of reality.<sup>14</sup>

The Second Vatican Council referred to the Liturgy as the heavenly Liturgy in which Christ himself presides from heaven. We must be able to enter into the Liturgy with true reverence and true love of knowing who we are encountering in each and every Mass.

Indeed, here we see how participation in the Liturgy gives people a meaning and a purpose for their lives. It takes them beyond the earthly confines of their everyday experience and points them to their eternal purpose. This is an act of charity.

We must remember that our goal in life is heaven, our goal in life is to live with Jesus Christ for eternity. And it is in the Liturgy that the Mass serves as a bridge to that eternity. It reminds us every time it is celebrated of who we are to worship and who we are made for.

---

<sup>13</sup> Second Vatican Council, Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 44.

I ask you to be mindful of this as you process in with the Gospels, unveil the Word of God in your preaching, bring forward the concerns of the community during the intercessory prayers. And as you prepare the altar for the Eucharistic sacrifice and bring the body and blood of the Lord to the faithful, remember that you are putting them in touch with Jesus Christ and his Church. Remember that you are connecting them with eternity. And also remember the beauty that is present there, for beauty attracts the human heart. And it is essential that our Liturgies be beautiful. They are most beautiful when they are reverent.

I am thankful to God for the beauty of our own Cathedral. It amazes me, whether people are Catholic or Christian or even Moslem or Jews or non-believers, when they enter our Cathedral and encounter the beauty that is there, most especially in the windows, their hearts are moved. They know there is something greater. And I am thoroughly convinced that beauty and reverence in the Liturgy will always, always lead us to God. It is He who has given us the gift of beauty, and we must remember that. And it is an act of charity to celebrate our Liturgies with that reverence and with that beauty.

## **Conclusion**

This morning I have explained why I believe the times we live in require deacons to ensure that charity is the first aspect of your ministry in your encounter with the people you serve.

We often speak about how St. Stephen – the Church’s first martyr – is the prototype or model for deacons, and in the realm of charity this is certainly true. The Book of The Acts of the Apostles describes St. Stephen as “a man of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>15</sup> The gift of faith and an attentiveness to the Holy Spirit are the solid foundation upon which charity is built. One of the titles of the Holy spirit is the Spirit of Love, that the spirit of love may flow in our hearts. In our Christian understanding of charity, it is not just an act of compassion or kindness. Rather, it is a uniting oneself to the God who is love, to the God who is three Persons. It is living in the communion of love with the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It is personal and it is essential that we help others to enter into that communion.

---

<sup>15</sup> Acts 6:5.

St. Stephen displayed this in his ministry. The Acts of the Apostles tells us, “Stephen, full of grace and power, did wonders and signs among the people.”<sup>16</sup> We know that he preached and went out converting others, and inviting them to encounter Christ. And in his last moments we see his complete devotion to Christ and his flock. And what was his greatest act of charity? Laying down his life for Christ and for the faith.

After false witnesses testified against him, he rose before the council and eloquently spoke about how God sought to save his people throughout history. Then, as they stoned him for his alleged blasphemy, St. Stephen showed that his heart remained fixed on Jesus Christ and on love for those who were persecuting him. He prayed, “‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And as he knelt down, he cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’”<sup>17</sup> ... his last words spoken, words of charity , words communicating the mercy and the forgiveness of God.. begging that for those who were stoning him to death. As we look at him, I pray for you and for all who are in ministry, that we too may keep our hearts and minds fixed on Jesus... That as you strive to bring him to a world in desperate need of him, you may open your hearts to encounter him ever more deeply. And most especially, in your ministry, in your diakonia of the Word, Liturgy and above all, Charity.

Thank you.

---

<sup>16</sup> Acts 6:8.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Acts 7:59-60.