

First Conference: The Call

A call is something personal, a personal enactment of God's Providence. In this, it reflects something essential about ordained ministry, as this is described by the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In answer to the questions, "Why the hierarchical ministry?" the Catechism describes five characteristics of the ministry: it is Christ-centered, ambassadorial, service-oriented, collegial, and personal. In this last respect, it devolves upon a person, who is called by a person, to render personal service to other persons.

This personal character is highlighted in the fact that the chosen one is called by name. In Mark's description of the call of the Twelve, Jesus first spends the night in prayer. Then he calls to himself those whom he desires, "to be with him and to be sent, and to have power to cast out demons." And he names twelve, as the evangelist goes on to specify, listing the names. It was not unusual for a rabbi in the time of Jesus to have followers, but it was unusual for a rabbi to designate an inner circle this explicitly. That distinction of apostolic office within the body of believers is something that the Catholic Church holds as of origin from Christ, and it remains the fundamental constitutional structure in the Church. The diaconate is a part of that distinction, in that the apostles themselves after Pentecost quickly saw the need for co-workers and thus constituted the office.

Jesus calls to himself whomever he desires. There is no explaining this, because desire has no explanation; it is itself the explanation. So shall the king desire your beauty (Ps 45:12). Deep is calling on deep (Ps 42:8). It is a singling-out, in the particular, by name. Jesus calls *me* by *my* name.

To emphasize, it is particular, not generic. In Caravaggio's famous painting of the Call of St. Matthew, Jesus simply points across the room to the tax-collector at the table, while the tax collector in turn points to himself in surprise and disbelief. There are others on either side of him, but he is the one that Jesus points to. This is one of the characteristics of the call. It is selective, and much as egalitarian sensibilities may object, it is not given to all. Indeed this is a characteristic of God's call going all the way back to Abraham. God chose a people for himself, and as Psalm 147 remembers, he revealed his statutes and ordinances to them; nor had he done thus for any other nation (see Ps 147:20). Such a choice is not a put-down of anyone else, and in the case of ordained ministry, it is not a put-down of any other state of life.

In fact, the call is not about worthiness at all. The Second Vatican Council taught that by baptism, all the followers of Christ have an equal dignity; nonetheless they have different functions within the Body. This variety of functions includes the ordained ministry. It is an honor and a privilege to be chosen for that ministry, but the choice is not an end in itself. It is not like being chosen as the winner of a beauty contest. Divine election is always linked to service, and those who are called are given a mission.

It is worthwhile to surface two common problems with this notion of a call. The first, as mentioned earlier, is an easily-offended egalitarianism—which amounts to little more than envy with a fancy name. As a vice, envy feels miserable about itself and cannot abide by the excellence or achievements of others. No one can be better than me, it whines, and so there can be no such thing as an elect—at least not without me. This kind of envy is sometimes internalized as a sense of shame in those against whom it is directed. Like family or friends tip-toeing around an irascible person, sometimes persons with a vocation are reluctant to speak of it to others, fearing to excite envy. But in the end, envy will never be satisfied. A vocation is what it is, whether the spiritually weak like it or not. The best way to deal with envy is to carry on as if it were not present. It should not be needlessly excited by boasts, but neither should it be permitted a veto. It will never be propitiated, and for this reason it can never serve a legitimate purpose in the theology or life of the Church.

The other problem with the notion or reality of a call is a sense of personal unworthiness. This may proceed from a low self-esteem or from an awareness of sin, but it should not be permitted to dominate the discussion about a call. To be perfectly blunt about it: no one is worthy. This is not a pious platitude. It is one of the reasons why the stories of Peter's denial and Paul's persecution of the Church are included in the New Testament. As the saying goes, God does not call the qualified; he qualifies those he calls. I may be able to think of a thousand reasons why God could not possibly be calling me to ordination, but if in fact he is calling me, all I am doing is putting excuses between him and me. There is such a thing as publican pride. It is not obvious, but if I insist on standing at the back of Temple protesting my unworthiness, when in fact God is calling me forward and making me worthy, I am being proud in a backhanded way. One wonders how much damage this variant of the vice has done to the Church through the years.

God is sovereign in his choices. In our envy or in our sense of unworthiness, we cannot hope to know more than he does or to be capable of more than he is. The Gospel ministry is nothing to be ashamed of. Moreover, God looks upon the lowly: he forgives sin; he lifts up the poor. At all times we remain earthly vessels, but our surpassing worth comes from the treasure that we contain, the incomparable good that is God.

Prophets, apostles, saints experience bewilderment and fear at the call and its implied task, but there is also an emotional reward in being chosen. You are my good and faithful servant, Jesus says. You are the ones who stood by me in my trial. Peter, I have prayed for you. The call and my response inaugurate a special relationship. It is an honor and we can feel special about it.

At the same time, we should bear in mind that God's process of qualifying us for the ministry—of purifying us—can be painful. The Word burns, like the purifying ember in the call of Isaiah. Suffering is a part of our ministry. And the same divine election that links us to service can link us to persecution as well. Whatever element of pain may be involved, our onetime feeling special because of the call may well be something that can help to see us through.

A vocation, like divine revelation itself, has an external and an internal dimension. On Tabor, the voice from the cloud was undeniable; so was the voice of Jesus. They are external sense presentations that come to down us today through related external presentations, namely, the message of the apostles, the written words of Scripture, the teaching of the Church. But of themselves these presentations are not enough to persuade us to faith. Besides the external word there is an internal word, and Jesus alluded to this when he told Peter that it was the Father who had revealed to him that he Jesus was the Christ (Mt 16:17). Besides the external presentations there is also an inner sense of sympathy, harmony, openness, or willingness to accept. This is what was missing in the critics of Jesus and in those who turned away from his preaching. This is what was finally supplied to the apostles and to the Church at Pentecost. Were not our hearts burning within us?

With a vocation, there is also an external and an internal dimension. Externally, a man may find others suggesting to him that he might be a good fit for ministry. He must have the ability, suitability, and stamina for the ministry. He must allow himself to be subject to the Church's scrutiny, to the feedback and evaluations of the formation program. Finally, if he is called, he will hear himself named in the rite of ordination, the most external possible attestation of Christ's will for him. Internally, these external presentations must meet a corresponding openness or willingness. The man may feel a heightened interest in matters divine, religious, or liturgical. He may feel an interest or a desire, a certain savoring of these things, and sense of being charmed by them. Above all, he may eventually discover a willingness to face challenge or hardship for the sake of the call, a certain patience or longsuffering.

In both revelation and vocation, each of these dimensions interprets and validates the other. The external expresses the internal, and the internal gives meaning to the external. Vocational discernment is often a process of an external sounding or mapping of the internal call. And sometimes vocational recruitment is a process that delivers the external invitation that a man has internally longed to hear.

In my personal experience, the story of the call of Samuel was highly formative. I entered the seminary just as the Second Vatican Council was beginning its second session in 1963. The reforms of the liturgy were still several years distant, and we often celebrated the old votive Mass for vocations. It was a noteworthy liturgy because it was one of the few with an Old Testament reading. The story haunted me. Verse one of the reading observed that by this time, visions were infrequent. Verse two observed that Eli's own vision was weakening. Yet in verse three, the lamp of God was not yet extinguished, and the boy Samuel was sleeping in the sanctuary where the Ark of God was.

I lived in an increasingly secularizing culture and I wanted to do something about it. In the story there was something compelling about the contrast between the unsleeping light and the sleeping boy: the light keeping vigil, ever-protective; the boy unaware of his extraordinary future. (For me, many years later as I exercised a seminary

ministry, I literally lived the house of the Lord. I slept in the same building that contained the Blessed Sacrament, and I always considered it a privilege. Nighttime visits to the chapel were something special.)

Then the dialogue begins. Samuel at first mistakes God's call and thinks that the ailing Eli is calling him. After the third time that this happens, Eli understands and tells Samuel how to respond. In the fourth call, when the boy is prepared, we actually hear God pronounce the name of Samuel—perhaps the boy does too. Perhaps before that, he did not really hear what was waking him from sleep; he just awoke with a start. And Samuel replied, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sm 3:10).

I think that this story plays out often. Others may see a vocation before the subject himself sees it. Or the subject may experience confusion and difficulty that only a wise director can help him to interpret. Whatever the case may be, the important thing is that the subject be willing to reply. Hearing a call is the beginning of a lifetime of listening.

So at the beginning of our retreat, I have two questions for you: what attracted you to the ordained ministry—and who helped you understand it? Revel in the answer to the first, and be grateful for the answer to the second.

Second Conference: Diakonia

Slaves, be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ, not only when being watched, as currying favor, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, willingly serving the Lord and not human beings, knowing that each will be requited from the Lord for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free (Eph 6:5-8).

The bishop and priest are ordained *in persona Christi capitis*. The deacon is ordained *in persona Christi servi*. Servus in Latin can mean either house-servant, which is what we usually think of when we hear “servant,” or it can mean “slave.” In the Philippians hymn, it is clear that Christ is a slave. Although he had the form of divinity, he did not cling to its prerogatives; he emptied himself and took the form of a slave. He was the lowliest of the lowly, and he is our pattern.

When we talk about a servant, there is always a twofold focus: the task at hand, and the command of the master. The two are a unity. We often think of service as a job description, a certain number of things that must be done on a regular basis, but the idea of ministerial service is inseparable from the idea of the master. To use a parallel example, we often think of giving witness as simply delivering a message, overlooking the whole courtroom dimension of the metaphor: we are giving witness to facilitate judgment, first the judgment for Christ that our hearers are called upon to make, but second the judgment on the world that the Spirit is constantly preparing (Jn 16:8-10). In a similar way, the task and the master of ministerial service are inseparable.

For Christ, the task was the world’s salvation and the master was the One who sent him. Jesus spoke of the latter constantly. The Passion was an act of obedience, but it is important to remember that above all it was an act of love. Christ knew himself beloved of the Father, and he loved in return, loving his own to the end. In spiritual terms, when we speak of God’s will or the will of the Father, we often presuppose a conflict between our will and his. But it is important to remember that the primary act of the will is love, and that obedience without love is little more than subjugation.

In theological terms, the pastoral charity that defines priestly and diaconal spirituality is inseparable from obedience. Ministry is indeed charitable service, but this service is the call of baptism too. What distinguishes ordained ministry from baptismal ministry is ecclesial obedience, that is, obedience in a visibly-structured hierarchical community. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in answering the question, “Why the ecclesial ministry?” describes five characteristics of that ministry: it is Christological, ambassadorial, service-minded, collegial, and personal (nn. 874-79). In each of these five respects, that ministry requires obedience. Christ obeyed the Father who sent him; we obey Christ, who sends us. Service simply *is* obedience; the servant who does not obey is worthless. Collegiality or any team enterprise requires the cooperation and unity of focus that obedience supplies. And the personal character of ministry locates that unity of focus in the judgment of one man, the ordinary or his delegate. Practically, there can be no ordained ministry without obedience, because the ministry of priests and

deacons is an extension of the ministry of the bishop—the deacon’s usually by way of the pastor.

The personal character of the ministry invites another set of considerations, based on what is sometimes called “the scandal of particularity”. When God chose to become incarnate, he chose to enter the realm of space and time in a new way—not just as author but as participant. This means he obliged himself to enter a finite world at a delimited space and in a delimited time: Roman Palestine in 4 BC. A choice this particular can easily invite criticism. Why not be born in America in 1980? Or at least, why not be born in Rome in 4 BC? But that is the scandal. Any nationality could say that about any other nationality that God might have chosen, and any time about any other time. Jesus himself might have had personal characteristics that some people could take exception to: maybe he was short or dark-skinned. The point is, he had to be something in order to be someone, and he had to live somewhere at some time—and every one of those particulars could be criticized.

Just as the Church is the extension in time of God’s Incarnation in Christ, so the scandal that attaches to that Incarnation now attaches to the Church. Why Rome and not Antioch or Jerusalem? Or New York, for that matter? Why this particular *stylus curiae* and not plainspoken English? Why this particular man as pope and not someone else? More to the point, why this particular man as bishop and not someone else (usually me)? The fact is, we cannot answer those questions in any but the most superficial sense. The greater part of the answer lies in what we have already seen, Christ called to himself those whom he desired—and there is simply no explaining desire.

The combination of the personal character of ministry and the scandal of particularity means that from time to time, I may not *like* my bishop or I may not care for the way he chooses to do things. I may not fully agree with this or that decision that he makes. Or I may like the bishop who ordains me and not like the bishop who succeeds him. It does not matter. All five of the dimensions of hierarchical ministry require me to work with him: the example of Christ, the commission by Christ, the service-centeredness of my calling, the collegial or team nature of our common enterprise, and the personal choice by which this man was constituted as ordinary and by which I previously had pledged my respect and obedience.

Ordained ministry as a way of life is chosen freely, not at our initiative but freely in response to Christ. “You have not chosen me; I have chosen you” (Jn 15:16). It is chosen freely, after the model of Christ, who freely chose servanthood. It is a voluntary lowering of self, a condescension in the literal sense of the word. Jesus stooped to wash the feet of his disciples. Jesus humbled himself in accepting the form of a slave, in accepting a slave’s death on the cross.

It is not often thought of this way, but ministerial obedience is a freedom-giving experience. Indeed, it is thought of in exactly the opposite way, as the epitome of oppression. But obedience locates authority and decision-making at the level where these can be most effective, where they can be exercised personally by someone who remains

responsible and accountable at all times. In Catholic polity, there is no refuge in the anonymity of a leadership group, and the likelihood of a runaway group dynamic is by the same measure lessened. In practice, there will be consultation, but one person retains responsibility and answerability. The others, having given their consultation, are freed of this burden.

In any kind of service, but especially in ministerial service, the good of another is more important than my own. In ecclesial ministry, the will of another is more important than my own. In fact, the my own good is realized precisely in serving the other (Vat II, PO 13). This can be a struggle, as it was apparently for Christ at Gethsemane. As then-Father Josef Ratzinger observed, it is only in recollection and calm that the ideal of service is harmonious, ordered, or balanced; in reality, the crucifixion was the tearing apart of a man. The grain of wheat dies, and no one welcomes death. But the process is redemptive. "Son though he was, Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hb 5:8). In short, we can expect that suffering and purification will be a part of our ministry, even an indispensable part.

On a visit to the seminary in St. Louis, Karl Rahner was once asked the simple question, "When is a priest most like Christ?" His answer was equally simple, "When he suffers." Indeed, one of the most poignant dimensions of the great pontificate of Pope John Paul II was the witness he gave as his health declined and his life slowly came to an end. He did not set his ministry aside so that he could have privacy and quiet, but died a very public death that illustrated exactly what Rahner meant. He embodied the wisdom of centuries of priestly ministry and life.

"And when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all obey him" (Hb 5:9). When Jesus stood upright again after washing his disciples' feet, he told them, "You must wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:15). In a parallel fashion, after forgiving Peter for his betrayal, asking him three times if he Peter loved him, he told him, "Feed my lambs" (Jn 21:15). In effect, he told him, "Show your love for me by loving my people." Our ministerial service is an expression of our love for Christ, our readiness to put him ahead of our own perceived good. And this is not lost on him, either. "I no longer call you servants but friends" (Jn 15:15), he said to his apostles and he says to us.

There is a reward to ministerial service, to the voluntary lowering of self for Christ. There is a special union with Christ in his own service, his own ongoing and living sacrifice. There is a special kind of friendship, the kinship and merriment of fellow-servants, like that of the waiter's table after a seminary banquet. The work is done. There is plenty of food and wine. And we enjoy the company of Christ as he and we recount the stories of ministry.

Third Conference: The Herald of Christ

We Americans have never seen much of heralds; microphones have put them out of business. Occasionally, when we see a royal ceremony on television, we might notice the heralds in their tabards. For the most part, though, for us “herald” is a name reserved for newspapers.

In my native St. Louis, there is an organization called the Mystic Krewe of the Veiled Prophet. In inspiration, it is based on the many krewes that sponsor the parades and the balls of the Mardi Gras season in New Orleans. There is a whole mythology of the Prophet. He comes to St. Louis once a year from his kingdom of Khorassan, to constitute a court of love and beauty that coincidentally consists of that year’s local debutantes. In the early days of television in St. Louis, the ball was broadcast, and part of the ceremony involved an actual herald receiving a scroll from the Prophet, and announcing in a booming voice, without a microphone, a summons of each of the principal debutantes to the court. It was a charming fantasy, although the city’s poor did not care for it much; still the image of that herald lingers in my mind. He did what a herald does: a herald announces things.

Christ is the herald of the Father. He made clear in his ministry that he did not speak on his own, but that he spoke only what the Father commanded. In turn, just as he was sent by the Father, he himself sent his disciples—to spread the same message. By ordination, the deacon becomes the herald of Christ. It is an important symbol of the ministry of teaching.

I would like to consider this ministry by exploring seven statements about its heart, namely, the word of God.

- 1) The word of God has power (see Ws 18:5).
- 2) The word of God is true (see Ps 19:10).
- 3) The word of God is a two-edged sword (see Hb 4:12).
- 4) The Word was made flesh (Jn 1:14).
- 5) Let the word dwell in you (Col 3:16).
- 6) Act on this word (Jas 1:22).
- 7) Preach the word (1 Tm 4:1-5).

An observation on each of these.

1) The word of God has power (see Ws 18:5). When most Westerners think about the idea of “word” at all, they probably visualize the four letters, w-o-r-d. This is because we are a literate people, and we have the skill of committing ideas to paper (or digital medium) and of interpreting the writing when we see it. In order to understand the Bible’s mentality, we must try to imagine what “word” means to a society that does not write or read. It is a sound, and in many cases, the sound is followed by action.

For the Bible, “word” does not just denote a means for conveying intellectual meaning. It is also a reality that contains power, and the more important the person who speaks it, the greater the power it contains. Most of us, on first hearing the story of Jacob’s cheating Esau of Isaac’s blessing (Gn 27:1-45), find it odd—but such was the power of the word. The blessing could only be given once. The word of a king, of course, was more powerful than that of a commoner. A king can command armies or executions. The word of God is the most powerful of all. God creates simply by speaking, and something that never existed before is summoned into being by God’s spoken command.

The prophets had a special relationship with God’s word, symbolized by Elijah’s theophany on Mt. Horeb. Remember that Horeb was the name of Sinai in the northern tradition. Elijah flees there in fear of his life after defeating the prophets of Baal and thereby antagonizing Jezebel, the queen consort. Bernhard Anderson sees in the incident a symbol of the whole prophetic movement, a return to the sources of Israelite religion in the Mosaic covenant tradition. Elijah is told to wait at the entrance of the cave, and the three symbols of the Great Theophany pass by—wind, earthquake, and fire—but Lord is present only in a tiny whispering sound (a still small voice), and thus the ministry of the word is born. “Prophet” means “mouthpiece.” The prophets constantly delivered the oracles of the Lord: “Thus says the Lord . . .,” “The word of the Lord came to me thus . . .,” and so on.

And their word contained God’s power over history. Elijah’s word brought about a drought, and similarly brought it to an end. Jeremiah’s word spelled the doom of the city of Jerusalem. The word of the prophets was known to be so effective, that kings and critics often persecuted the prophets to prevent the word from being delivered.

It is important for us to remember that the word we preach contains power in itself. It has effects we may never envision. It is effective often without our consent or aid. Every preacher has had the experience of giving what he thought was a mediocre or uninspired homily, and then of being thanked afterwards by someone who was deeply touched by it. This only points up to how much the ministry of the word still belongs to God its author and depends on him for its effectiveness.

The word also contains the power of life (Jn 1:4; 6:68; 1 Jn 1:1). It contains the breath of life (as in Gn 2:7, Ps 104:29-30; Jn 22:23), in that a spoken word is always carried on the breath. It changes lives, as in conversion. It changes hearts, for those who were dead in sin (Ez 36:25-28; Ps 51:12). And Paul is very clear about what results from death in sin: envy, rivalry, contentiousness, gossip, bitterness, harsh talk, hostility, bickering, factions (see Rm 1:29-30; Eph 4:31; Col 3:8). The word of God brings life to deadlocked communities; it teaches us to accommodate and to forgive.

2) The word of God is true (see Pss 19:10; 119:43).

The word, as truth, describes reality. Faith in the word is not simply a subjective state; it is not just wishful thinking or sentiment. It is a distinctive access to reality. The martyrs did not die for their beliefs; they willingly went to their deaths for a real person with a real existence. It is important for ministers of the word to understand this. We live in a culture of casual relativism, a culture that does not believe in truth. Its stance is internally inconsistent—in effect saying, “The truth is that there is no truth.” And not believing in truth, it is not troubled by inconsistency either. Another variant of this stance is the positivist position: knowledge that cannot be verified with sense data is of no value or validity. But of course, this position itself cannot be verified with sense data. The sensible world is only part of the universe of being; faith enables us a limited access to the rest. For example, at any given time in contemporary life, we are constantly surrounded by electromagnetic waves carrying the communications media; however, we can only hear the media if we have a receiver of some sort. In an analogous way, faith is such a receiver, allowing us to hear the communication of the spiritual realm that surrounds us at all times.

Perhaps the most important insight of the great teaching pontificate of Pope John Paul II was his diagnosis that contemporary Western culture believes truth and freedom to be incompatible. If there is such a thing as truth, then I am not free to do as I please. But Christ taught that the truth will make us free.

More recently, the Vatican has taken to speaking of the teaching office as a ministry of truth.

The mission of the Magisterium is linked to the definitive nature of the covenant established by God with his people in Christ. It is this Magisterium's task to preserve God's people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error. Thus, the pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates (CCC 890).

In a world that can be so easily confused and cynical about what is real and what is important, the guarantee of truth without error—at least in the most crucial issues—is an immense consolation. It may offend our educated elites, but it is a reassurance to many others.

Faith is a gift of vision to see the reality that the martyrs saw. The difference between belief and unbelief in the Bible is like the difference between sight and blindness. For the believer, there is no need to be embarrassed about being to see what others cannot or will not. At the same time, there is no need to be harsh with these others; the blind deserve our compassion.

3) The word of God is a two-edged sword (see Hb 4:12).

The word is the principal weapon that God uses against his enemies: evil and falsehood. Insofar as we ally ourselves with him, we wield that weapon in exactly the same way. The difficulty, however, is that we still have a residue of these enemies in ourselves. Thus the two-edged sword cuts both ways. The same word that we proclaim judges us as well as the world. This does not make us hypocrites, because we are not consciously attempting to deceive. But it does require us to be honest about the ongoing task of conversion. We must be diligent and consistent about a regular examination of conscience, and we must make frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance. Above all, we must have regular contact with a spiritual director and we must see to it that he or she knows everything of importance that is going on in our life.

4) The Word was made flesh (Jn 1:14).

The Word of God, through whom all things were made, entered the world, became incarnate, and made his dwelling among us. He pitched his tent within our camp. We saw his glory, we heard his voice, we felt his embrace. After knowing him, we could go to no other (Jn 6:68). The word that we proclaim in our teaching ministry is not simply a message but a person, and our ministry is not first of all to win arguments about the message but to bring people to that person. The Incarnate Word continues to dwell in our midst, as the Lord dwelt in the tent-sanctuary and in the Temple, giving us strength, courage, and protection. In him we see nothing less than the face of God.

5) Let the word dwell in you (Col 3:16).

The word does not simply dwell in our camp; it dwells in our hearts as well. The word is rich, like the richness of a banquet (Ps 63:6); it fills us, and runs over (Ps 23:5). In a powerful image, the Book of Revelation presents Jesus as standing and knocking at the door. If we open to him, he will enter and have supper with us (Rv 3:30). To afford the word a dwelling in us, we must let it find a welcome in our heart, let the Incarnate Word make a home with us.

6) Act on this word (Jas 1:22).

It is not enough simply to assent to the truths that Christ has revealed. His teaching has a moral component, the law of love, and this means that our assent must be manifest in our activity. The word is ever-demanding of us, calling us a more and more perfect reflection of Jesus himself. Our character is transformed in the encounter with Jesus. We seek to reflect him to our family, our circle of friends, our parish, our workplace, our community. We seek by God's grace more and more to live the self-emptying love that Christ came to teach us.

7) Preach the word (1 Tm 4:1-5).

If the word is within us, we must let it express itself in our sharing. In 12-step programs, the final of the steps is to share the story of conversion and recovery. The process of this sharing reinforces the process of recovery and deepens its power. In the spiritual realm, we are all addicts to sin, all in the process of recovery. We may confidently expect that as we share the story of salvation, the power of that story will grow within us.

St. Paul reminds us that we possess this treasure in earthen vessels to make clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us (2 Cor 4:7). Of ourselves, we are fragile instruments, subject to breakdown and in need of continual adjustment. But God has chosen to offer his salvation to the world through instruments just such as this. At best we are his assistants: he allows us a role but he sees to the completion of the task himself.

Matthew ends his Gospel with the Great Commission, the command that forms the pattern for our ministry. Go, preach, baptize. We are heralds, delivering the word of Another; we are witnesses, who have experienced the Reality we proclaim; we are generous hosts, sharing the Bounty that was once shared with us, sharing new life, sharing joy. When in Luke's Gospel the seventy-two returned from their trial run as evangelizers, they were infectiously jubilant (see Lk 10:17ff). Jesus himself exulted in the Spirit and sang a blessing to his Father for revealing himself to the merest children, to *these* little ones, this bumbling group, his disciples—and through them to the world.

Fourth Conference: Virtues, Gifts, Epiclesis

The ordination ceremony for deacons asks, “May there abound in them every Gospel virtue,” and lists the following: unfeigned love, concern for the sick and poor, unassuming authority, the purity of innocence, and the observance of spiritual discipline. A word on each.

The love that is asked for would be pastoral charity. It is a form of agape, the kind of disinterested love that is capable of putting the good of other ahead of the self. The modifier is “unfeigned” or sincere. It is a kind of love that cannot be simulated. It is not friendship, but a kind of love that is still real. The prayer asks that the ordinands be given a love from their hearts for the people they will be sent to serve.

The next virtue requested is concern for the sick and the poor, two groups that were especially dear to Jesus. It is easy to neglect the sick, especially in a society that shuts them away in hospitals or long-term care centers; in the same settings, it is easy for the sick themselves to feel isolated or neglected. Something similar can be said for the poor. In order to serve either group, the deacon will have to acknowledge and deal with a certain poverty in himself that may leave him reluctant to associate with the misfortunate. He will have to cultivate an ability to see the true humanity of persons in these situations and a corresponding ability to feel Christ’s desire to serve them through him.

Unassuming authority is part of the mentality of the servant, a particular kind of servant called the steward. This person is put in charge of the rest of the household staff, while remaining a servant himself. He has a true responsibility, and the household depends on his discharging it effectively, but he does not have the right to “lord it over” his fellow servants. Unassuming authority, as its name implies, means that the steward does not assume a stance of arrogance. He is to carry out his duties in humility and behind the scenes.

The purity of innocence may be a reflection of Christ’s blessing on the pure of heart. As Kierkegaard wrote, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” This is probably at least a prayer for clarity of focus. The added prayer for innocence reflects Christ’s desire that his followers be plainspoken and have the simplicity of a child.

The final virtue requested is spiritual discipline. This would be a reference to the ongoing challenge of maintaining good habits and routines in the struggle with the concupiscence of our fallen nature. Growth in the spiritual life requires a constant positive effort, and now the deacon puts forth the effort not only for his own benefit but for the benefit of the people who look to him for example.

These virtues are augmented by the gifts of the Holy Spirit invoked earlier in the prayer by the phrase, “the sevenfold grace.” The phrase is a reference to Isaiah 11:2-3 in the Vulgate translation, *et requiescet super eum spiritus Domini spiritus sapientiae et intellectus spiritus consilii et fortitudinis spiritus scientiae et pietatis et replebit eum*

spiritus timoris Domini, in which seven gifts of the Spirit are named: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. In contemporary translations, the last two gifts are conflated, yielding a list of six gifts.

The patristic and medieval tradition produced many explanations of these gifts. It will be sufficient here to give an indication for each and then for the ensemble. For Thomas, the gifts were considered perfections of the virtues. Like the virtues, the gifts function in the realm of operative habit, to assure a manner of acting in accordance with what we are by the entitative habit of grace. The gifts help us to be at home in the divine life we share by grace, but unlike the virtues they are operated by the Spirit not primarily by us. By means of the gifts, we become the instruments of the Spirit, cooperating actively. An analogy that is often used is that the virtues are like oars but the gifts are like sails. Rowing requires a lot of effort on our part, but when the sail is filled with the wind of the Spirit, we move quickly and with ease.

Four of the gifts are intellectual perfections, and so it may be worthwhile to consider them together. Wisdom is an affective knowledge, a taste for God, a sense of the ultimate cause and everything else as related to it. Understanding is an ability to penetrate the meaning of the life of grace and to relate all things to our final destiny of beatitude. Knowledge is an ability to evaluate created things—including thoughts, inclinations, circumstances, deeds—as consistent or inconsistent with faith. Counsel is a readiness to seek the guidance of the Spirit for addressing complex practical problems.

The last three of the gifts are moral perfections. Fortitude is a steadfastness for doing good and avoiding evil regardless of cost and with confidence in God's power. Piety is a veneration of God in the kind of homage and worship that are appropriate to his majesty and holiness. Fear of the Lord is reverence: a fear born of love; a fear of losing what we love, namely God; a fear of our ability to turn away from him. Piety and fear are two sides of the same coin, the first seeking a positive proper approach to God, the second knowing what to avoid in order to protect that approach.

Together the gifts create a supernatural instinct or intuition, a sympathy, a readiness, a willingness. They form the point of view and the attitudes of a person in love, who no longer thinks and plans for himself alone but for the relationship, for the beloved, and for their future. In the ordained ministry, this love is pastoral charity: the love of Christ and the love of those to whom he sends us.

Both the prayer for the gifts and the prayer for the virtues are set within the context of an epiclesis, a prayer to the Father to send the Holy Spirit for a specific purpose. This is a theme that also deserves exploration.

The poet Annie Dillard once observed that if God somehow dramatically appeared in the staid worship-services of some churches, no one would know what to do about it; whereas, if he appeared in some of the boisterous worship-services of the newer, more radical churches, they would be right at home with him. She has a point; maybe we have tried too hard to tame the Spirit.

To understand the power of an epiclesis, it might be worthwhile to review invocations of the spirit of God in the Old Testament and of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. The Spirit blows where it wills, Jesus tells Nicodemus (Jn 3:8), an unpredictable, uncontrollable, irrepressible power. It is the wind that blew over the waters at the beginning of creation (Gn 1:1), the wind that parted the waters of the Red Sea (Ex 14:21-22). It is the spirit that came upon the seventy at the meeting tent, even on the two who had remained in camp—and they all prophesied (Nm 11:25). It is the spirit that came upon Samson and prompted him to tear a lion to pieces (Jg 14:6) and later to kill a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Jg 15:14-15). It is the spirit that rushed upon Saul after his anointing, giving him a new heart and sending him dancing into a prophetic state (1 Sm 10:1-12). It is the spirit foretold by Joel, poured out in the messianic age, sending sons and daughters into prophecy, giving dreams to old men and visions to young men (Jl 3:1-3). It is the spirit that will rest on the sprout of Jesse in sevenfold gifts (Is 11:1-3). It is the spirit who rests on the Trito-Isaiah, anointing him to bring glad tidings to the poor, healing to the brokenhearted, liberty to captives and prisoners, comfort to the mourning, and a year of favor from God (Is 61:1-3).

All of these prophecies were fulfilled in the baptism of Jesus, when the Spirit descended in the form of a dove and the Father's voice thundered from heaven. Jesus ministers in the power of the Spirit, prays in the power of the Spirit, rejoices in the power of the Spirit. He promised that same Spirit to his disciples and his Church (Jn 16:7-14). On Easter Sunday, when he appeared in the upper room, he breathed forth the Spirit on his disciples in John's Pentecost (Jn 20:19-23). It was nothing less than rescue breathing, parallel to the first breath of life in Genesis (2:7).

In Luke's Pentecost, some of the wildness of the Spirit is depicted (Acts 2:1-12). A great wind resounds through the house, and the Spirit descends as fire, parting in tongues. Then the apostles speak in tongues, ecstatic utterances too great for words, indeed, the inner dialogue of the Trinity come to earth. The bumbling Peter is suddenly bold and eloquent. And the words of the apostles meet with faith.

Later in Acts, in thanksgiving for the release from prison of Peter and John, the community prays. The house shakes, and all within are filled with the Spirit (Acts 4:31), as if the wind of Pentecost blew throughout the ministry of the apostles, recurring like a theme. In Ephesus, Paul lays hands on the baptized, who are filled with the Spirit and begin to speak in tongues (Acts 19:1-6). At the institution of the Seven, the apostles once again pray and impose hands (Acts 6:6).

In the epiclesis of the ordination rite, Jesus has bound himself once more to send the uncontrollable Spirit. Who knows what will happen when it comes?

**Fifth Conference:
Vocational Fidelity: The Good and Faithful Servant**

At several places the rite of ordination of deacons speaks of faithfulness. After the promise of obedience, the bishop prays in the words of St. Paul (Phil 1:6), "May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfillment." The prayer of ordination asks, "May they remain strong and steadfast in Christ." At the *Hanc igitur* of Eucharist Prayer I, the bishop prays, "We beg you . . . in your mercy to preserve in them the gifts you have given, that what they have received from your divine goodness they may fulfill by the aid of your divine grace." And in the suggested homily for the rite, he concludes by saying, "Then on the last day, when you go out to meet the Lord, you will be able to hear him say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.'"

A commitment for the whole length of my life demands faithfulness or fidelity. Scripture scholars point out that the biblical notion of truth connotes the idea of fidelity—on God's part especially—more than the idea of adequation of mind with reality as we have learned from the Greeks. The truth of who and what I am also depends on my fidelity. My integrity, my being true to myself depends on faithfulness. I have focused my life amidst all the options and confusions of a fallen world. I have given my word. To be un-faithful is to lose focus, to drift, to be false-hearted.

As in the whole life of grace, vocational fidelity is not first of all *my* doing: it is a response to God's fidelity, God's faithfulness to his promise. It is like the bonding of parent and child: God promises his people that even if a mother could forget her child, he will never forget them (Is 49:13-17). Vocational fidelity, the fidelity of spouses, the fidelity of the ordained and of religious, is a reflection of God's fidelity to us. In marriage, it is an effective sign of that fidelity.

Fidelity is supported by the fidelity of others and by a community that believes in and expects fidelity from its members. This is coming to be in short supply in the West. Traditionally, the difference between a child and an adult is that a child is motivated by feeling but an adult by value. All that glitters is not gold. Not everything that feels good is right, and sometimes what is right is also painful. Adult responsibility requires courage and sacrifice. There is such a thing as duty, and duty can be our friend. Our place in the world of meaning is secured by an act of meaning that only we can make—our decision expressed in our word. A whole nexus of relationships then depend on us.

Since World War I, Western society has seen a wholesale assault on the institution of marriage and the whole concept of commitment. As described by sociologist Philip Rieff in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, we have been witnessing the replacement of traditional Western culture with a new culture and a new cultural ideal, psychological man. In traditional culture, the highest organizing ideal is the notion of commitment, the idea that the relationships like family that build culture are worth making sacrifices for. In the new culture, the highest organizing ideal is a manipulable sense of well-being. The highest value is feeling good, and anything that interferes with

that value may be discarded. Certainly sacrifice falls into that latter category, and so it may be discarded—along with anything that requires it.

As a consequence of this societal change, we have ended up with a situation of no-fault divorce, casual cohabitation (we used to call it concubinage) in place of marriage, and massive numbers of departures from priesthood and religious life. The disarray is incalculable. Against this disarray and its causes, the Church asserts the necessity of responsibility, commitment, and fidelity. For doing so, for acting like an adult, she is rewarded with adolescent laughter from people who should know better.

What all of this means is that persons who are about to make a life commitment, whether in marriage, vows, or ordination, must be aware of how much they will need support, how little support they will get from society, and how much they will have to devise intentionally a way to live out their commitment and to find its support. In the case of the ordained ministry, this is a particular challenge, since decreasing numbers of clergy are facing an increasing level of demand, and the overwork that can result can leave a man isolated and emotionally exhausted. In such a circumstance, an intentional support group is a necessity, as is a proper balance of work and leisure.

A mentor friend once observed that priests leave the active ministry because it no longer holds meaning for them. If this is the case, our faithfulness demands that we attend to the sources of meaning in our life, and that we constantly nurture the meaning of the priesthood among those sources. We must engage in reading and reflection that stays abreast of societal changes, and we must be diligent about continuing our formation and our education throughout our lives—intentionally, programmatically, interactively, and accountably. Every decade of life—not just midlife—has its challenges, and we must seek to understand them and to weave the meaning of our commitment into them. Failing this task, we will find that our commitment can too easily seem like a youthful fantasy, eminently discardable.

Faithfulness involves a long, long time, but we must also understand that we are not angels. We do not possess the ability to carry or to determine the whole of our life in a single moment. For this reason, we must also be careful of the discouragement that can accompany the imagined challenge of “the rest of my life.” There is never a time when we carry the whole “rest of my life;” it is a burden we are not created for. We live our lives in the present, a day at a time, and as Jesus said, a day’s challenges are enough for us (Mt 6:34). I will live my commitment today, with reasonable plans for tomorrow. Next week can take care of itself.

An important aid for living a day at a time is the Church’s whole structure for the sanctification of time. Through the feasts and seasons of the year, we encounter the mystery of Christ broken down into constitutive elements so that we can more easily appropriate them. Through the regular celebration of the sacrament of Penance, we are able to hold ourselves accountable for delimited periods of time. Through the daily celebration of Mass and the Hours, we raise our lives to God as they unfold, receiving his gifts with gratitude and recommitting ourselves to the life he has called us to. Sacred

time thus gives us way-stations (see Jn 14:2), regularly recurring oases (see Ex 15:27; Nm 33:9) for our refreshment and renewal. Indeed, as Josef Pieper has argued, it is only on the basis of divine cult that we can have any leisure at all.

It helps to have images for the most important things, and one of the best images for faithfulness comes from the story of Noah, namely, the rainbow. God pledges in that story that when he sees the rainbow he will remember his promise not to destroy mankind again by water. When we see it, we can remember that promise as well, the new beginning he made of the human race in Noah and later in Christ and baptism.

In the Bible, the regularity of the cycles of nature does not result from the unchanging laws of physics, as we think of them today. They result from God's untiring faithfulness. In the celebration of creation in Psalm 104, God "sends" rain (vv.10-18; also Ps 65:7-14), like a gardener watering his plot; he opens his hand—present tense—to feed the creatures who look to him for food. Our blessing at meals is in part a thanksgiving to him for his faithfulness.

In the nineteenth century American West, Indian treaties were signed for "as long as grass grows, the wind blows, and the sky is blue." The treaties were broken faithlessly, of course, but God always keeps faith. Psalm 103 (vv 15-18) celebrates the contrast between our finitude and his faithfulness:

As for man, his days are like grass,
He flowers like the flower of the field;
The wind blows and he is gone,
And his place never sees him again.

But the love of the Lord is everlasting . . .

Let us allow ourselves a sense of awe and wonder at the surpassing and untiring faithfulness of God. Let us ask him to strengthen us, because we are weak, our hearts are fickle, and the journey is long.