

“All for the Service of the Gospel”
Homily for Ordination to the Diaconate of Nicholas Case
August 29, 2020; St. Raphael Church

Introduction

God’s calling comes in different ways, and each one who has received God’s call has his own story – it seems like it is almost tailor-made, each one taking a different path and discerning that call and responding.

God’s Call

We see this also in the life of the prophets of the Old Testament. We can think of the call of Isaiah, for example, when he has vision of heavenly worship when he is in the Temple. God gives him a kind of indirect call: “Whom shall I send?” He enthusiastically responds, “Here I am; send me,” with much alacrity. We can contrast that with the call of Jeremiah, which we heard in our first reading for Mass today. He seemed to be a bit resistant – this happens sometimes when we receive a call. He says he is too young, and it seems like he was looking for excuses.

I sometimes wonder if the real reason for Jeremiah’s resistance was that he foresaw what was going to happen, because Jeremiah had a very hard time of it. He was subject to much harsh treatment and persecution. The authorities did not like the message he was proclaiming, which was God’s Truth, so they tried to take his life: they threw him into a cistern, and put him in stocks overnight. He suffered all this for proclaiming God’s message.

Yet, such suffering, in some form or another, is always a necessary part of being an authentic spokesman for God. Our Lord teaches that in our Gospel reading today: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.”

There is a sense of what one has to renounce, of suffering that one must endure, in order to be an authentic spokesman for God. It is the price that comes with, and has to be paid for, being God’s servant: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and *where I am, there also will my servant be.*” “Where I am,” because he has modeled this for us. His servant is following the pattern he has set in his own passion and death – there the servant follows. This is what it means to be great in God’s eyes, as Our Lord also teaches here: “The Father will honor whoever serves me.” That is how we offer our lives as a pleasing sacrifice to God.

The Meaning of Vocation

However, it is not just a matter of putting up with all kinds of suffering and harsh treatment and be sad in this life so that we can have the payoff when we die and have a nice comfortable life in Heaven in the hereafter. There is much more to it than that.

Later on in Jeremiah, when Jeremiah is going through all this harsh treatment, we hear his famous soliloquy about how the Lord “duped” him. He says, “You duped me, O Lord.” It’s like the Lord tricked him into being His servant because of so much suffering. But Jeremiah cannot keep the Word of God within, he cannot but proclaim God’s Word.

By God’s Providence, it just so happens that this will be the first reading for our Mass tomorrow, the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, when, it just so happens, Nicholas will give his first homily. There will likely be times in your life, Nick, when you will see this as a sign of things to come. It happens in every vocation.

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This is what the vocation means, that is, you cannot be who you are without fidelity to what God has called you to do with your life, no matter what that call might be. To renounce that would be to renounce your very being, to violate who God created you to be. So Jeremiah, despite all this suffering, cannot but proclaim God's Word because he must be true to himself and to whom God created him to be.

Unity of Service

I see this in another way as well in the story we heard from the Acts of the Apostles with the Ethiopian eunuch, who converts under direction of Philip – what must have been the shortest R.C.I.A. experience in the whole history of the Church! Moved, under the direction of Philip laying open the Word of God to him, he asked to be baptized. Then, the reading says, he “continued on his way rejoicing.” We can be sure that he went himself spreading the Good News.

Good news is like that; that’s another thing about our human nature. When you have really good news, you cannot help but share it with other people. When something really great happens in your life – you get engaged to be married, land your dream job, graduate at the top of your class, achieve success amidst a great difficulty – you cannot keep it inside. We need to share that good news with others. All the more so, then, do we share what is truly Good News, the only Good News that is of true and lasting value, that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior and has given us the gift of eternal life by his death on the Cross and his Resurrection from the dead.

We see that motivation in Philip himself, who catechizes this Ethiopian. He goes to Ethiopia. Think about the ancient world at that time: Ethiopia was the hinterlands, beyond even the farthest boundaries of civilized world. The Acts of the Apostles is telling us that the Gospel is now reaching the furthest corners of the earth. The Apostles are fulfilling the command that their Lord gave them.

Philip cannot help but bring that Good News wherever he possibly can go. It’s that same kind of burning desire to share good news. He goes all the way out to the peripheries, one of the favorite words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, who constantly reminds us to do that. As the Pope points out, peripheries are not just geographical, they are also existential.

We are certainly facing the reality of existential peripheries in our own time, right here in our own place: homeless, drug addicts, victims of domestic abuse, undocumented, and now, all the more so, the distress so many are experiencing as a result of the current pandemic. We have to worship outdoors – and thank God we have mild elements to deal with today! – which is a bit of an inconvenience. But this is nothing compared to the hardship and distress so many people are experiencing today. There are many people living on existential peripheries who need the Good News brought to them. This is why the Church has ordained ministers, to bring that Good News to the peripheries.

Ends of the Earth

But there is something else about Philip that we can see as part of the calling of an ordained minister. The Philip here in the Acts of the Apostles is one of the “seven reputable men” mentioned a little bit earlier in the Acts of the Apostles, and are appointed to assist the Apostles with the administration of temporal goods. The Apostles were getting dragged too much into the weeds of administration, so they entrusted this to these seven reputable men. These are the precursors to the Order of Deacon. Therefore, it is not Philip the Apostle who is mentioned in this passage from Acts, but Philip the Deacon.

And this scene takes place shortly after Philip’s ordination. As the reading says, after they selected these seven men, “They presented these men to the Apostles who prayed and laid

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hands on them,” which is the action of the Rite of Ordination. It is shortly after this that Philip goes out. They were appointed and ordained to attend to temporalities, but not only: we see very clearly from the start that they also went out to proclaim the Gospel. This role of the deacon is also illustrated in the Rite of Ordination, as, after the Laying on of Hands and the Prayer of Ordination, Nicholas will be vested with the vestments of the Order of Deacon – the stole and dalmatic – and then presented the Book of the Gospels as a sign that the deacon is also to go and proclaim the Gospel.

This tells us that the roles of service in the Church all have as their ultimate end the service of the Gospel. Whether that is directly preaching the Gospel or even attending to temporalities and matters of administration or education or anything else that God calls His people to do, all of these roles of service are, in some way or another, ultimately for the service of the Gospel.

Every vocation is a way to spread the Gospel. We see that in our readings for our Ordination Mass today, whether that is the Apostles themselves, whether it is deacons going and preaching, or the basic Christian vocation to bear witness to the Good News and share it with those with whom one comes into contact, as was the case with Philip and the Ethiopian in the story from Acts.

Those in Holy Orders exercise their role in the communion of the Church’s ordained ministers, in the local church, under the supervision of the bishop, who is literally the “overseer.” They dispose themselves, at his direction, to go where they need to go and to take on whichever role of service best serves the local church for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Conclusion

We give thanks to God today for the vocation of our brother Nicholas, who has discerned and responded to God’s call to ordained ministry – and ultimately (please God) as a priest, to offer the sacrifice of reconciliation to God for the sanctification of God’s people. This last step before Priesthood – the Order of Deacon – signifies that the priest, as well, is called to serve, and all of his service, all of the roles he fulfills, is for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Thank you, Nicholas, for your “yes”, and, when I present the Book of the Gospels to you after your promise of obedience to me and my successors (which promise makes possible this hierarchical communion among those in Holy Orders and the coordination of evangelical activity under the oversight of the bishop), I pray that you may realize in your life the words I will speak to you then: “May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to fulfillment.”