

042008 Fifth Sunday in Easter

Blessings. “Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, whom we shall appoint...The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit,” and six others... And a little later, Scripture says, “Now Stephen was filled with grace and power, and was working great wonders and signs among the people.”

It is a mystery to me that I was ordained a deacon. Those of you who come to know me will quickly recognize that this parish has received a stripped-down, low budget version of St. Stephen as one your deacons... You surely deserve better. You need better... But I want to say a few words about my ordination to become a deacon – or to the diaconate as it is called. I’ll do this before moving on to the Gospel words of Jesus – He who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

They selected Stephen and six other men... and they presented these men to the Apostles who prayed and then laid hands on them... These were our first deacons in the Church.... and the word of God spread and the number of disciples increased greatly.

If I tell you that the day of my ordination was perhaps the greatest day of my life... you might ask why my wedding day or my first Communion day weren’t the greatest. And all I can answer is that I was so young... so young and immature when I received those first sacraments. But when it came to be my ordination day – June 12th, 2004, this was the culmination of four years of studies.

What a flood of memories from that day of ordination. Archbishop Chaput met with us men and our wives for a private breakfast before the ordination. He came around to each of us individually. First – the archbishop asked if I felt unworthy – if I was unsure of doing this step. And after listening to the answer – he said: ‘none of us are worthy. I am not worthy to be your bishop. I am a sinner. But the Church and its representatives have looked at you, they’ve formed you, they’ve educated you... and prayerfully, on behalf of Christ – they believe you are ready to become a deacon.’ That took a big weight off of my mind.

Next – I remember being prostrate on the floor of the cathedral as the choir sang the Litany of the Saints. A while later, I remember the bishop’s hands on my head as he prayed for me just as we heard in today’s reading, “They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.” I remember the bishop having us turn around and face all those present in that jam-packed cathedral. I saw my wife and family and those hundreds of people smiling and applauding...

A final memory – as we processed out after the ordination Mass... I wound up walking down the aisle with my friend, Deacon Don. And as we walked outside into the bright sunshine, over and over, Don kept saying, “Praise God... Praise God, Praise be to God.” It was so very powerful. Dear friends – it is likely that every bishop, every priest, every deacon, nun and professed religious person feel or felt such emotions when they walk down a center aisle after their liturgies.

All of them likely had or have similar emotions and spiritual intentions of being like one of the apostles or presbyters or first deacons of the Church. But human frailty and the reality of sin quickly interfere. As I said at the beginning – this parish has gotten a stripped down, spiritually lean version of St. Stephen in me. But I pray and try my best. So too does deacon Ed... and deacon Jesus... and so too does Fr. Bill. We are all broken in different ways – but God in his wisdom has helped bring this team to this parish... we are unworthy... but it does seem that at this point in our journey – this is God’s will for us... and for you. Maybe only to demonstrate that He, God, wants more vocations... more and more people to respond to the needs of the Church.

Jesus said that He is the way, the truth and the life. Look at what Jesus did for us – the cross over our tabernacle shows the ultimate demonstration of what it means to be a servant. And if we look at the model of the deacon, Christ made Christian love and service the stairway that led to heaven for the martyr Stephen... It may well be the same stairway that you and I need to gain entrance. So --- let me reflect for a few moments on the call of Jesus in our lives...

Not too long after I was ordained, I was talking with a spiritual friend. I raised the question about surrendering to a call from Jesus. “What if Jesus wants me to go out along the highway and hold up a big poster against abortion? I’m not sure I want to be called to that kind or level of commitment.”

The spiritual advisor laughed and said... “Tom – Jesus may call you to love someone... maybe to do some act of compassion or help for someone... but He’s not likely to have you in wild animal skins and holding signs along the highway.”

And what is so interesting to share with you is that in and through His Church, Jesus HAS given me so many things to get involved in... the birth and baptism of babies... the formation of adults to enter our Church... almost a dozen couples to prepare for – and some to actually perform their marriage ceremonies. Like Fr. Bill and Deacon Ed, I’ve been in hospital and hospice and nursing homes... I’ve prayed for people that I would never see alive again... This is what I see that Jesus wants of those who follow his path... in love.

In a highly articulate speech at the United Nations, Pope Benedict provided strong philosophical and moral arguments to lay out the case that human rights are inherent to humans; we have God-given dignity that cannot be defined or manipulated by segments of society. The existence of a person... pre-born, born, developmentally challenged, poor or alien, aging or dying deserves dignity, care and protection. This is, perhaps the greater meaning of the words to follow the way... the truth... and the life of Christ.

The ending words of the Holy Father’s homily during the Washington, D.C. Mass at Nationals Stadium spoke to this need: Those who have hope must live different lives! Are you living in the hope of Christ? Are you recognized as a follower of the way... the truth and the life?

Reading 1

Acts 6:1-7

As the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19

R. (22) Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.
Exult, you just, in the LORD; praise from the upright is fitting.
Give thanks to the LORD on the harp; with the ten-stringed lyre chant

his praises.

R. Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

Upright is the word of the LORD, and all his works are trustworthy.

He loves justice and right; of the kindness of the LORD the earth is full.

R. Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

See, the eyes of the LORD are upon those who fear him, upon those who hope for his kindness, To deliver them from death and preserve them in spite of famine.

R. Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

Reading II

1 Pt 2:4-9

Beloved:

Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it says in Scripture: Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame. Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and A stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall. They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny. You are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the

praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Gospel

Jn 14:1-12

Jesus said to his disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where I am going you know the way.” Thomas said to him, “Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves. Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works

that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father.”