

Homily notes 9:30 AM: May 27, Church of the Redeemer

Our sisters and brothers at the Corrymeela Community, Northern Ireland's longest-serving centre for peace and reconciliation, begin their day with these words:

"We resolve to live life in its fullness:
We will welcome the people who'll be part of this day.
We will greet God in ordinary and hidden moments."

Thank you, thank you, for the opportunity to offer these reflections. My name is Michael Shapcott. I am an ordained vocational deacon at Church of the Holy Trinity – Trinity Square. You may be expecting, perhaps even hoping, that this homily will draw from the wisdom of today's lectionary readings. I am sorry to disappoint, but my words today are part of the diocesan discernment process for parishes considering whether they will raise up a vocational deacon.

The Church of the Redeemer is in the midst of that important journey. The ministry of the deacon is an ancient and wonderful tradition. Deacons are called to toil in those "ordinary and hidden moments", working alongside the faithful, working with the community, serving in a ministry of justice and peace and love.

So, it is perhaps no surprise that the deacon's ministry began with widows in the early Christian community. Women in those days derived their social and economic status from their relationship with men. To become a widow – therefore to be unattached to a man – was disastrous. Poverty, hunger and ill-health defined the lives of many, most widows.

At the same time, the care of the widow has always been an absolute duty for the faithful. There are more than 80 Biblical references to widows, including Jeremiah: "...do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow..." (Jer. 22:3b).

The early Christian Church understood that the Kingdom of God was not just the sweet hereafter. Jesus taught us: "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). James wrote: "religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress..." (James 1:27a).

Which brings us to chapter six of the Book of Acts, where we read that one group in the church (the Hellenists) complained of another (the Hebrews), saying their widows were "neglected in the daily distribution of food". Oh dear, oh dear! The widows were suffering, and that was bad. The Christian community was failing in its duty to the widows, and that was very bad.

The church leadership responded with a new order that grew into the diaconate. In our time, the vocational diaconate is on an upswing in the Diocese of Toronto. There are 51 vocational deacons, with another three as postulants, engaged in all parts of the church and community.

Diaconal ordination in the Anglican Church of Canada includes these solemn instructions:

- “You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work and worship”; and,
- “You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.”

In my ministry as a deacon, I face towards the church to call the faithful – laity and clergy – to take up their duty as expressed by Micah: “...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God...” (Micah 6:8).

In my ministry as a deacon, I face towards the world to embrace the words of Isaiah, “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free” (Isa. 58:6).

But it is not all gloom and doom. Isaiah tells us that as we practice real and tangible justice:

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
You shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
You shall be called the repairer of the breach.
The restorer of streets to live in.” (Isa. 58:12)

I know that you experience many moments of grace and joy in your work of justice here at the Redeemer. The deacon’s ministry aims to strengthen those strong foundations.

My diaconal ministry has its roots in my late teens, when as a newspaper reporter I wrote about housing and homelessness. In the 1980s, I worked as a community organizer with the homeless at the Toronto Christian Resource Centre. Over the decades, I have developed affordable housing; engaged in public policy locally, nationally and internationally; and worked with others on poverty and hunger; social exclusion and inclusion; homophobia and transphobia. Tomorrow, I will be in Ottawa for a roundtable with senior federal officials on Canada’s new National Housing Strategy.

And that is pretty much the same story with my fellow deacons – each of us grow into our ministry through years of work and service inside the church and in the community, much of it ages before we even kneel before a bishop.

At the heart of the ordination of a deacon is what is rather sternly called “the examination”. The bishop addresses the faithful: “...every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit.” The Bishop, is, of course, reminding all of us of our baptismal covenant to:

- “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself...”,
- “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being...”; and,
- “strive to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation...”.

At the core of the deacon's ministry is servant-leadership. The deacon doesn't stand above, or apart, from the rest of the faithful. A vocational deacon supports, encourages, enables, cajoles, promotes, sometimes even hectors, inspires and challenges the church – laity and clergy – to live out our common calling. Facing towards the world, the vocational deacon strives for a higher moral standard, a stronger recognition of human dignity and the value of all creation. Through servant-leadership, the deacon seeks to mobilize others for the common good.

May I offer a small fashion statement: After ordination, deacons wear their clerical stole over the left shoulder. My own diaconal stole is under my outer vestments – as is the custom – but for the purposes of this demonstration, let me slip on an extra stole. John Chrysostom, an early Church father, said that the swaying of the deacon's stole brings to mind the wings of angels. In our tradition, angels are, quite literally, messengers, and play a number of roles in practical service, in praise and worship and in ministering to people.

My outer vestment is called a dalmatic – another symbol of the office of deacon. The dalmatic has the practical advantage of sleeves. This allows deacons to literally roll up their sleeves as they work to fulfill their ministry of service to the church and to the community.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tell us we are all "born from above" in a wonderful, and mysterious, gift of grace from God. Deacons are meant to support all of us in living more fully into that reborn life. The Iona Report of the Anglican Church of Canada notes:

"The redevelopment of the Diaconate has recalled the Church to a fuller and more vital expression of its ministry as agents of mercy, healing and justice in the world, especially among those living at the margins of systems and society, restoring the image of Christ who came 'to bring good news to the poor'. Women and men called to this ministry of sacramental presence in the world serve as a reminder to the People of God that all are likewise called to follow Christ's example of *diakonia*."

The unofficial motto of the vocational diaconate is: "Keep calm and call a deacon."

May I end with words from Corrymeela's Prayer for Courage:

"May we be courageous today.
May we learn today. May we love today.
Amen."

And amen again.