

5th Sunday of Easter Cycle A
May 2, 1999

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 6:1-7
1 Peter 2:4-9
John 14:1-12

A life lived deeply is a powerful witness.

Here come the deacons...the first deacons, that is, in Acts chapter 6.

There apparently was some unfairness, some prejudice perhaps, in the early church when it came to distributing the community goods. Whatever the cause, the Twelve chose to apply a familiar practical solution: they increased the staff...so that “we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word,” says Acts, chapter 6. They suddenly considered themselves too important to wait on tables? Who knows. What is interesting about the account is the Apostles’ flexibility in responding to the needs of their time. That the seven chosen all have Greek names suggests a kind of an affirmative action on the part of the community. They chose Greek speaking members thereby assuring that the neglected Greek widows would be remedied. And so the diaconate began.

As the ages rolled by the function and the meaning of the diaconate took various shapes, sometimes of minor importance, but always linked to service, whether liturgical or communal. In the contemporary Western church, the hallmark of deacons is that they assist, not preside, even though, in response to need deacons do preside at baptisms, marriages, and burials. Thus, the diaconate gets more closely linked to the priesthood...but I hope not too close. I think it is too splendid for that.

I have often wondered if there is a hidden hindrance in the preaching and the hearing of the

Word in today’s Catholicism because of the specialization of us priests. I mean more than the quality and length of sermons. It is inevitable that some of us preachers are just not as good as others – certainly not as good as some preachers with whom I have the privilege of associating through our ministerial association here in Greenhills and elsewhere...preachers who have grown up more in the tradition of the Word than of sacrament.

An old African-American woman told a group of us priests one day, “I’d rather hear one sermon lived than ten preached.”

If there are problems with our preaching, it is not only that we are too busy doing other things as priests – although administrative duties can consume a pastor in any parish. A far bigger problem is this: even the best of homilies can be sloughed off because it is tied to the very nature of the presiding office, the task, the business of priest craft.

As I see it, a significant charism of deacons in the contemporary church is related to the fact that most of them are married, have other places of work, have had an active career, and have no reason to give service to the church other than their faith. The work of priests, even their preaching, can be subconsciously passed off as, “what they have to do.” But when a deacon visits the sick, when a mail-carrier or a business person gets into the pulpit, something else is going on. And people know this. It’s not just “their job.”

There's something particularly moving and engaging about an ordinary person who wants to read and preach the Word of God – and it's not “business as usual.” It cannot be sloughed off as something that is “expected” to be done. The witness of married folks, living “ordinary lives,” is most powerful precisely because they do not need to do it, nor are they expected to do so. One of the charisms of the Promise-Keepers and *Opus Dei* is the fact that people who seem ordinary desire to do uncommon things for God and community. So, the primary source of the priesthood or conversions to the Catholic faith is the example of family members, friends, and co-workers. It is a matter of persons, not institutional strategy...it's a matter of sermons lived and not just preached.

I know of two women, one a nun-physician, the other a wife and professional photographer, now both deceased, who confided that they experienced in their work strange powers of communicating faith that no priest or preacher seemed to have. Because they didn't have to preach and pray, people could not ignore them the way they could ignore an official minister.

Since they were not expected to be servants of the poor, advocates for justice, or ministers of the Word, they could not easily be explained away.

In my work as a priest, this is the very thing I experienced in those moments when married women scouted the far reaches of mystical prayer or a father of a family revealed before me and other men how his life would have had no final meaning or joy without Christ. We've all known deacons who, because of their kind service, led others to say, “See how these Catholics love one another – and others as well.” It is precisely because they were not priests that they were so effective.

We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation. The ritual prayer that commissions deacons can really be said of us all:

“Receive the gospel of Christ whose herald you are; believe what you read, preach what you believe, put into practice what you preach.”

Whatever our office in the church, we are all called to be deacons, just as we are called to the priesthood of faithful believers. The diversity of roles, I think, is life-giving. A mother lives what I could never preach.

A celibate reveals a color in the spectrum of faith that spouses cannot. A single lay person consoles in ways that other Christians never could.

The Archdiocese has a wonderful program for folks interested in becoming deacons – and a great program for men and women interested in any type of lay ministry. If you or someone you know might be interested, talk to me. This table of Word and sacrament nourishes us for just this sort of service.

During these Sundays of Easter we have in our midst grand witnesses to the Faith...those who were baptized and confirmed at the Vigil and those who are making their first Holy Communion. Communion in the Lord Jesus is not just for private enrichment but for public service. As our little people take their steps in faith under the tutelage of their parents, may we be enriched and grateful and give praise to our God who calls us nothing less than his very own sons and daughters.

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is a powerful witness.