

NDICE ADDRESS:
THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE DEACON
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Good morning. Thank you for inviting me back for this year's annual conference of the National Diaconate Institute for Continuing Education. It was an honor to be your keynote speaker in 2006, and it is an honor to have the opportunity to give this year's closing presentation.

I'm excited to be here with you, for a number of reasons. I was ordained to the diaconate myself, in my journey to ministry as a bishop, in 1959. As a bishop, I had the great joy of serving as the chair of the Bishops' Committee on the Diaconate in our country for three years. I was present when Pope John Paul II met with three thousand deacons and their wives in Detroit in 1987. It was a powerful experience of Universal Church that I have reflected on, over and over again, ever since.

As a bishop, I have been deeply impressed by the ministerial commitment of the deacon communities I have experienced. First, when I was bishop of the Diocese of Yakima, in Central Washington, and again in my present diocese, Spokane.

I'm very happy to report that in 2006 I ordained six men to the diaconate, to serve in parishes in the southern part of our diocese. I ordained another deacon this summer, again for service outside the Metropolitan Spokane area.

Spokane is not a huge diocese, in terms of Catholic population, although at 13 counties and a bit over 24,000 square miles, it is somewhat challenging in terms of geographic size. Fortunately, I like to drive!

But keep this in perspective: Those ordinations for the Church in Eastern Washington give us almost as many active deacons as we have active priests serving our people.

And our deacons are active! I am constantly delighted at their initiative and their enthusiasm, their capacity for work and the joy they find in their ministry.

The deacons of the Spokane Diocese come to their ministries from all ages, all walks of life, all sorts of occupations. I'm sure all of you can tell similar stories, of the rich life experiences that deacons bring to their ministry.

One of our deacons is a retired nuclear engineer. We have a large number of retired men who came to the diaconate as a sort of "second career" – educators, physicians, bus drivers, salesmen. Some of our deacons have been called to ministry from the Indian communities on our Reservations. Many of our deacons minister from and within our diocese's rich, growing Hispanic community.

One of the things that strikes me about the men God calls to diaconal service is the high percentage of candidates who also spent considerable time discerning a vocation to ordained ministry as a priest. I'm not at all surprised anymore to learn that a man who is discerning a call to orders as a deacon also has spent time answering another call from God. After much prayer, much reflection, with the guidance of spiritual directors and others, they have come to know that God does not necessarily call them to priesthood, but perhaps calls them to ordained service as a deacon. And the Church is so much richer for that.

I cannot place a value on diaconal presence and ministry. Not that I would want to, necessarily. The restoration of the diaconate is one of the many blessings of the Second Vatican Council. As you well know, the Council Fathers first thought that diaconate would be of greatest benefit to emerging countries, to Third World nations. In fact, the greatest growth, and the greatest continued growth, of deacon presence has been right here, in the United States.

Most deacons do not work professionally for the Church. Some do. In my diocese, two members of my staff are deacons and work full-time for the diocese. The director of our diocesan retreat center is a deacon. Two of our deacons work full-time in hospital ministry. The principal of one of our Catholic elementary schools is a deacon. Our Director of Deacons is a full-time pastoral associate for one of our busy city parishes.

Most, however, are not. Most deacons earn their livings elsewhere, or have retired from work in some secular field. They now seek to serve the Church and her people as best they can, with the skills and life experience that they combine with their training as deacons.

Most deacons are married, and most have raised families, or are continuing to raise families, children and yes, sometimes grandchildren as well.

As deacons exercise their three principal ministries of Word, Altar, and Charity, they present themselves as men who have experienced life in ways similar to the people with whom they minister. When a deacon stands at the ambo, to preach about the Gospel he has just read, people look at him and know, This is a man who knows what it means to make a mortgage payment. This is a man who knows how much he has to pay for shoes for a six-year-old – and who knows how quickly a six-year-old can outgrow a pair of shoes! When a deacon meets with an engaged couple, and talks about the joys, but also the challenges, of married life, that couple knows the deacon speaks from life experience that is grounded in faithfulness to the Gospel. When he comforts a family that has lost a child, or a woman who must bury her husband, those people know that this deacon understands deeply and honestly just how precious is the relationship between a parent and a child, between a husband and a wife.

Over and over again, you encounter people's lives, at their most tender moments – moments of great joy, moments of great sorrow. And you are privileged and honored to witness the holiness of those lives. Just as you touch people, you are touched in return. As we meet people, as we minister, within these powerful, sometimes raw encounters, how can we not be changed ourselves?

This is not to suggest there is no value to witness and presence of priesthood. Do not misunderstand me. But just as priests have their own particular place in the Church, their own role to exercise as Christ calls them to minister, so do deacons. And I marvel at the depth of humanity, and compassion, and lived experience which deacons bring to their ministry.

Our loving Savior, Jesus, understands our struggles, and our temptations, and our disappointments and our joys so very perfectly, because he is God, but also because he is fully God, and fully human. Christ walked as one of us, as our Brother. When he learned of the death of his friend, Lazarus, Jesus wept. When people were hungry, he fed them. When they were anxious, he calmed the storm.

Very similarly, deacons work within the great Communion of Saints with an understanding of life, and of family, that gives them unique insight, and compassion, and even access to people's lives and sensibilities. When they preach, they preach from experience. When they minister, they minister as men who have seen much, and done much, and reach out with true empathy.

Ultimately, all of these are things to celebrate! Deacons are one of God's true blessings for the Church! I hope you know this, and I hope you hear it, and often: We are grateful for the presence and ministry of deacons.

I believe that all of the things I've just mentioned to you provide important clues to a deacon's ongoing formation.

It's my experience that deacons are men who examine their lives on a regular basis. They are men who listen to the voice of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They are men who are willing to make changes – sometimes radical changes! – as God asks them to do.

Consider: I would guess that a huge percentage of deacons come to their ministry from retirement from their secular employment.

As they discern God's loving call, and as they begin their formation program, they quickly realize a very important fact: diaconate is no answer to a mid-life crisis. Or the kind of identity crisis that rears its ugly head when a man retires, and looks around, and suddenly has no idea who he is, or what his purpose in life might be.

The great baseball player Yogi Berra is credited with a lot of funny, kind of crumpled up sayings that make you think for an extra second – and they're usually worth the little bit of extra effort. For instance, Yogi is credited with describing a popular spot this way: "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded!" He's the man who gave us, "It ain't over 'til it's over."

But one of my favorite Yogi-isms is this: "If you come to a fork in the road – take it!"

As I said, think about that one for a moment.

We all know people who have come to a fork in the road and been paralyzed. They just stopped. They were unable, or unwilling, to make a decision. Whether the choice they faced was massive, and life-changing, and profound, or even something mundane, they simply are too uninvolved with their lives. They don't really care. They drift. Or they become stagnant with indecision, and instead of truly engaging in all life has to offer, they allow life to wash over them, and carry them wherever the current will run.

That is not the case with deacons! Over and over again, I see deacons as men of maturity, of rich life experience, who look for possibilities, who look for challenges, who listen for the voice of God and watch for the movement of the Spirit. That voice and that movement are usually messages of challenge, and of change. God asks us to consider possibilities. Reforming our lives. Taking on something more. Doing something different, or doing the same thing, only differently.

Deacons don't drift. They are men who really do come to the fork in the road, and they take it. They grasp it and embrace it and claim it as their own. Deacons are men whose hearts are open, whose spirits are listening. Perhaps they are already busy with careers, and families, and other activity. Perhaps they are retired, and poised to enjoy their "golden years" in comfort and leisure. But as men of prayer, as men who journey through life aware of the constant presence of Jesus, they know that sometimes God asks something more of them. God presents them with a fork in the road. And they cheerfully, and joyfully, and with open hearts and generous spirits, take that fork.

The sense of joy that deacons bring to their ministry is another part of the pattern I see over and over again as I am blessed with the experience of deacons in my own life as a bishop. These have been tough days for the Church here in the United States, and even throughout the world. You've all seen the headlines. You've all heard the reports. Many people have looked into their hearts and decided that they cannot continue to participate in the Catholic Church. We pray for them, and we wait for them to return.

But despite hard times, and dark days, and darker nights, we Christians must maintain a sense of joy. That has to be a foundation stone for our lives as Christians, and our lives as ministers of the Gospel.

What do I mean by that?

Sometimes people think of joy as some sort of sense of giddiness. Foolishness. Simplicity – and not in a good way of being simple, either!

But joy is a quality of authentic Christian life that is unmistakable. You can sense it about someone. Despite setbacks, despite challenges, even despite perceived failure, the Christian has at his very root the sure conviction, the certain knowledge of a fact so awe-inspiring, and so comforting, that it cannot be denied: God really is in charge. It's not me, it's not you. God is in charge. God does not ask us to accomplish the impossible. God asks us to do the very best that we can, with the gifts and opportunities with which he has blessed us. And then allow God to be God. Allow God to be in charge.

With that certain knowledge of God's presence comes certain knowledge of God's divine plan. Do we understand it? No. Not in this life. But we know that God has a plan, and that all things work for good.

We know that our God loves us, and cares for us, and as the psalmist says, God holds us in the palm of his hand. And that certain knowledge, my brothers and sisters, is cause for great, undying joy – exactly the kind of joy I see in deacons everywhere.

Does that mean that we are joyful, because we have no responsibility? Of course not. Are we joyful because we are always effective, always brilliant, always God's sharpest and strongest tools? No. We are all of us works in progress. Father Ronald Rolheiser OMI says, "All of life's symphonies remain unfinished." We are all on a journey through this life, toward eternal life. We are incomplete. We continue to search. We continue to form ourselves as best we can, relying on God's grace and the guidance of the Spirit. As St. Augustine said so very well, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee, O God."

We can allow our expectations for ourselves and our ministry to overcome us. That is true of bishops, and priests, and as I have heard over and over again, it is true for parents. Look at how you raise your children. Being a deacon couple is no guarantee that your children will practice their Faith. Parents who are committed Catholics have no assurance that their children will do the same. You know that as well as I. You know it even better than I.

But does that mean you stop loving your children? You do not allow your expectations of your children get in the way of your love for them, your appreciation of them. You have hopes, and dreams, and ambitions for your children – and more likely than not, your children have very strong hopes, and dreams, and ambitions all their own! And that is as it should be. And you love your children, regardless.

It's very much the same with ministry, whether a deacon or a bishop or anyone else. We dedicate ourselves to doing God's work. We prepare ourselves, commit ourselves. We pray, and discern, and remain open to God's guidance.

And it may or may not work out just the way we wanted it to.

Joy is one of the fuels that keeps us moving forward, when even the best laid plans of mice and men don't work out quite as well as we'd hoped.

How do we become joyful?

I'm sure I sound like I'm just repeating something you've heard too many times to count. But that's often the case with truth, isn't it? As parents, how many times do you have to teach your children certain lessons? Be careful of strangers. Look both ways before crossing the street. Don't spend more than you earn. Over and over and over again.

So, again, I will tell you that the best way to stay focused, to stay joyful; to remain committed and energized; to get up and keep going, even when that seems like the most foolhardy choice you can make: you must be men of prayer.

There are many, many reasons for the Church's daily cycle of prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours. For one, it gives all of us a framework, a pattern of prayer. I pray Morning Prayer each day, knowing that men and women throughout the world, in dozens of languages, are offering God those same prayers. Whether I am in Our Lady of Lourdes Cathedral at home, or in a basilica, or with my brother bishops, as I pray, I am in union with the Universal Church. Perhaps that particular day's readings don't speak to me as strongly as they did yesterday. I can pray those prayers, knowing that somewhere, those readings, those prayers, those Scriptures and psalms and canticles are deeply touching the heart of someone else. And I can join my prayer with theirs.

We never have to take time away to pray and then think, "I can't think of anything to say. Anything to pray about." The Liturgy of the Hours offers us words of elation, words of triumph, of sorrow and grief, and yes, words of joy. What speaks of our joy as ministers more strongly than the Canticle of Zechariah? God has come to his people and set them free! God has come to us! To set us free! Free to worship him, and to do so without fear! We can pray and worship in a spirit of joy, and a spirit of gladness, secure in the knowledge of our God's tender compassion.

You must be men of prayer.

That means private prayer. If you are in a situation where you can pray the Liturgy of the Hours in a communal setting, that is wonderful, and that is as it should be. It is the prayer of the church. If you can pray the Hours privately, in the solitude of your home, or some other place of prayer, do so!

How many deacons have a personal relationship with a spiritual director? A good spiritual director is one of those pearls that is beyond price! Besides offering suggestions for deepening prayer, or improving prayer, a good spiritual director helps you be honest with yourself. How often have you prayed? Is your prayer stagnant? Have you given up? A spiritual director listens, and guides, and suggests, and provides a touchstone for your spiritual checkup.

I urge you to be men of private prayer as well, in addition to the Hours. I cannot encourage this too strongly. Whatever form your prayer takes, be consistent. Be committed. Make it a part of your daily routine. Set aside a period of time – whatever that period might be – when you can spend time, alone, with our loving God. Do you pray with a Scripture passage? Wonderful. Do you meditate on Christ's words? Good. Are you a contemplative? I applaud you. Do you have devotion to the Lord through his Blessed Mother, and the rosary? Be strong in that commitment.

Believe me when I tell you: You must pray. You must pray every day. You must.

Our greatest prayer is the Eucharist. Pope Benedict XVI in his recent apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist called Eucharist “a companion on the journey.” Reams and reams have been written about Eucharist. I can't begin to touch on something that is so complex, and yet so simple; that is personally fulfilling, yet builds us into a community of faith.

How often do you take part in Eucharist? And not necessarily as a minister of the altar, or a minister of the Word. Do you have the opportunity to attend Mass during the week? Is it possible to make time to do that? I know that not every parish can celebrate Mass at times convenient for everyone. But have you made an effort to take part in Eucharist, beyond a Sunday celebration? Or even, beyond a Sunday obligation?

One of my favorite lines comes from the Communion Rite, as we recite the Our Father. The celebrant prays with the community, using these words: “In your mercy, keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Not just me waiting. Not just you. We wait, in joyful hope.

For what are we waiting?

Not perfection. I'm not perfect. Probably none of you are, either. God is perfect. And someday our imperfection will meet perfection. Our waiting, our joyful hope, will be fulfilled. We will not meet our Lord as we meet him now, under the sign of bread and wine, but face to face, in a joyful reality we cannot even imagine.

Church is messy. Father Rolheiser pointed out that church life consists of muck and grace. That is where we minister. Yes, there is muck. But yes, there is also grace. God's Grace, God's voice, God's Spirit, searching for open hearts, searching for willing hearts, searching for hearts that are listening, and ready to answer with a resounding Yes.

Our God comes to us with a love so profound, so overwhelming, that is with us every moment of our lives. No matter which fork in the road God asks us to take, we can answer “Yes,” with gratitude for the privilege of doing God's work on earth.

Be men of prayer. Be men of the Eucharist. Let the world see your Faith. If you do those things, the world cannot help but see your joy. And your joyful hope.

Please pray for me, and for all bishops. Know that I keep you in my prayer.

May God bless you and peace be with you always. Thank you.

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