

5th Sunday of Easter
May 22, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

Holy Orders

Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7
Psalm 33
1 Peter 2:4-9
John 14:1-12

This weekend, one of our seminarians, Juan Manjarrez, was ordained a deacon at the Fort Smith Convention Center. It was a wonderful celebration for the Catholic community of Fort Smith. In a beautiful coincidence, our first reading this weekend explains the origin of the diaconate ministry and it offers us an opportunity to reflect on the Sacrament of Holy Orders in the Church.

While I often think of pizza delivery as a *holy order*, that is not what the phrase refers to in the language of the Church. The phrase actually derives from a term used in ancient Rome to refer to a specific group of persons. For example, a blacksmith organization could be referred to as an *order* of blacksmiths. In a similar way, the Church refers to the structure of ordained ministry as “Holy Orders.” This structure of ministry was necessary in the Early Church, and continues to be necessary, in order to maintain the unity that Christ desired for the Church.¹ The structure of ministry was already present in the New Testament Church in the three-fold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon.

The word, “bishop” is derived from the Greek New Testament word, επισκοπος. This title, used in the Acts of the Apostles 20:28, can be defined as “a directing hand, an overseer, or guardian.” It is a word that was used to describe the ministry of the Apostles, who were given a unique teaching role by Jesus.² While this role eventually went beyond the original Twelve Apostles, it always maintained solidarity with the Twelve. Some examples of this can be found in the lives and ministries of Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy, who were contemporaries of the Twelve and had been commissioned by the Twelve to do ministry through the laying on of hands. Among all of the Apostles, there was a noticeable unity that was maintained by Saint Peter. In other words, the New Testament clearly shows that Peter had a place of prominence among the Apostles and they frequently consulted him regarding their ministry.

The title “priest” comes from the Greek New Testament word, πρεσβυτερος, and it means a presbyter, elder, presider, or priest. We find references to this ministry in many places through the New Testament, including in Acts 14:23, 1 Peter 5:1-4, James 5:14, and Rev. 4:4. The function of “presbyter” suggests a person who shares in a council with another person. We notice in the New Testament that the presbyters often shared some of the same functions as the Apostles, but were always subject to their authority. James would be a great New Testament example of a presbyter.

¹ See 1 Cor. 1:10-13 and Eph. 4:3-6

² See John 16:12-13

In our first reading today, we heard how the ministry of deacon began. The Greek New Testament word used in our reading today is, *διακονος*, which means “servant” or “minister.” The ministry of “deacon” was established to assist the Apostles (bishops) in serving by taking over the administrative, organizational, and outreach ministries.

In the Catholic Church today, we find this same structure of ministry. We have several names for bishops today. For example, the Pope is the bishop of Rome and is a visible sign of the unity of the Church, just as Saint Peter was two thousand years ago. Cardinals and Archbishops are also bishops, but their titles tell us something about the duties they have within the Church and the territory they serve in. Similarly, there are a couple of different titles used for priests, “Father” and “Monsignor,” however they both belong to the same Holy Order of Priesthood and they assist the bishop in his ministry. We also have deacons who serve the Church today. Deacons can either be transitional or permanent. Juan Manjarrez is a transitional deacon, meaning that he is being prepared to be ordained a priest. Whereas a permanent deacon is not in the process of being prepared for priestly ordination and can even be married, like our deacon candidate, Tom Jakobs.

In addition to these three Sacramental “Holy Orders” within the Church, it’s important for us to remember that every single Baptized Christian is a member of what is known as “the priesthood of all believers.” When Catholic children are Baptized, they have blessed oil smeared on their head and the priest or deacon explains, “Just as Christ was anointed priest, prophet and king, so may you share always as a member of his body into everlasting life.” This sharing in Christ’s priesthood is what we heard about in our second Scripture reading today, in which Saint Peter wrote, “You are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own...’” (1 Peter 2:9). Peter was not writing just to presbyters in this letter, but rather, he was addressing all Christians. What does it mean for Christians to be a priestly people?

To say that all Baptized Christians are priests does not mean that they have the same function or ministry as ordained priests. But, it does mean that every Baptized Christian is called to offer the main function of priests—to offer sacrifices. Whereas the Old Testament priests had to offer countless bloody sacrifices of animals, Christians are invited to offer the unbloody sacrifice of themselves. In other words, one of the most priestly functions we can perform as Christians is to give ourselves in love to God and others.

I invite us this weekend to pray in a special way for all bishops, priests, and deacons in the Church, that they might be living witnesses of Christ’s love, and that their lives will inspire other Christians to sacrificially love God and others.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Read 1 Peter 2:4-9. What does it mean for you to be a royal priest? What are the greatest sacrifices that you lovingly offer in your life?