



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Easter Year A

Respected, wise and spirit-filled

Readings: *Acts 6: 1-7, Psalm 32, 1 Peter 2: 4-9, John 14: 1-12*

The origins of the Christian priesthood are multi-layered and complex. We encounter the earliest instincts of Man to offer sacrifice to God, through the double offering of Abel, through the Abrahamic rituals and the strange meeting in the plain with the great archetype, Melchisedek, bearing bread and wine, all of whom are memorialised in the Canon of the Mass. We witness the priesthood of Aaron, bearing the twelve tribes of Israel on his breastplate before God. We read of the raising up of a whole tribe dedicated to leading the people's worship in the person of the Levitical priesthood.

In the New Testament we see the Mass emerging from the Passover and the Apostolic presidency at the liturgy, with the rapid expansion of the mission field, devolving upon the presbyterate, the priesthood we recognise today and who still live in presbyteries.

The emergence of the episcopate, the bishops is much easier to trace, flowing directly and seamlessly from the Apostles. The *episcopo* is literally the overseer by whose authority the Church, through its ministers, has direct historic and immediate link with the life of Jesus. In the bishop the Church has direct and unbroken access to the Apostolic ministry of Word

and Sacrament, entrusted to each new generation of priests by the laying on of hands. We go back to Peter and to Jesus and our sacred task is to hand on only what we have been given in Christ. The Pope himself, even with his absolute authority, is bound by this solemn covenant of trust. He is not an innovator but a re-presenter of eternal truth.

Today, however, we are given the reading about the origin of the third order of ministry, the diaconate and there could not be, in one sense, a greater contrast. We can practically give you the date and the time of day of its founding, the reasons for it and its essential tasks.

The sudden and almost exponential growth of the community of faith has raised up certain happy problems. It is clear that, from its outset, the Christian community is a charitable one. It is not in the business of supporting sturdy beggars who could work (St. Paul says if a man is not willing to work he should not eat). But it is minded to carry out the corporal works of mercy and care for its dependants. This social care has become such a task that it is taking too much of the Apostles time, inhibiting their prayer, preaching, teaching and missionary work.

In direct response to a practical and spiritual need, the Apostles create the diaconal ministry and please note how they do it. They appeal to the community of faith 'look out' seven men who are of proven worth, wise and Spirit filled. The community is entrusted with the task of raising up and presenting these men. This ministry emerges from the People of God. It is ratified by the Apostles who lay hands on the chosen. It becomes, therefore, a sacred ministry. It is worth remembering that this office is both holy and ancient, finding its origins in the very earliest life of the Church. The pattern of seven deacons was repeated in cities throughout the world and

throughout Christendom. St. Francis was a deacon.

What is fascinating to see is that, though these men were raised up to do the practical caring tasks, the bedrock of their ministry of service (for that is what 'deacon' means), their ministry did not stop there. Very shortly thereafter one of them, Stephen, becomes the Church's first martyr for his public witness to Christ Jesus before the secular authorities. It is his faithfulness and death that will shortly thereafter profoundly affect one of the witnesses, Saul of Tarsus.

When the Church is scattered in the subsequent persecution we witness the Deacon Philip converting the Ethiopian courtier and beginning a train of events that takes the Gospel to Africa. He goes on to preach in Samaria and elsewhere. We see the deacons beginning to emerge then as more than charity workers. They become witnesses, martyrs, preachers, missionaries and, incidentally and consequentially, with a place in the liturgy.

Tragically all those great tasks atrophied in the history of the Church into a solely liturgical function and then only as a temporary step in a man's journey to priesthood. In our time and in the wake of the Second Vatican Council that ministry has begun to be rediscovered in its own right and thanks be to God for that. The first generation of those deacons are now getting on (like the rest of us). Many have retired (or re-retired for many of them were selected from older men who had the time to study and serve in the first place.) What we need now is the next generation of men to serve in this extraordinary and beautiful ministry. We need some younger men to take up the baton, to serve the altar, serve the people, serve the mission field of the parish. Today I just wanted to sow that seed in your hearts.

'Respected. Wise. Spirit-filled.' These are the men we seek. This is what we are praying for and these are the servants we look to the community to raise up.

For your prayers.

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