

Explore the diaconate sacrament

Deep spiritual significance surrounds this rite of ordination

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In order to appreciate the meaning of any sacrament, it is a good idea to meditate upon the words, symbols, and ceremonies which are part of the liturgical rite in which the sacrament is received. That is one reason why married couples can benefit spiritually from attending weddings and priests from attending ordinations.

By participating in the experience of the sacramental event in the life of others, we can discover anew the meaning of the same reality in our own life. In fact, an excellent way to prepare oneself to receive any sacrament is to go through the rite prayerfully, and with attentiveness, considering the personal implications of each part of it.

RITE OF ORDINATION

As we look at the sacrament of the diaconate, and try to understand its place in the life of our archdiocese, it is wise to examine the rite of the ordination of a deacon since, as with all of the sacraments, the deep spiritual significance of the diaconate is expressed within the rite through which it is received.

All ordinations occur in the midst of the Eucharist, after the proclamation of the Gospel. This is the ideal setting for other sacraments as well, such as Baptism, Confirmation and Marriage. It is important that the sacrament of ordained ministry be situated in the context of the great sacrament which lies at the heart of the community that is served by those who are ordained. The ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons is centered on the mystery of the Eucharist, so that it may be for all of the people of God the source of their life of discipleship.

As with the other levels of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the candidate is called by name, and personally expresses a willingness to be ordained. That is one essential element of a vocation to ordained ministry: the individual must be personally willing, after years of prayer and discernment, to commit his life to the mission of serving God and the people in Holy Orders.

The first sense of a vocation comes many years before, often stimulated by the suggestion of others that the person may have a vocation to the diaconate or priesthood. In calling someone, God speaks gently in the silence of the heart, through recurring thoughts of serving as a deacon or priest, and also through the voice of others. Notice how in the Gospels, other people sometimes served to bring a future apostle to Jesus.

In fact the vocation to the episcopate occurs totally through the actions of others, but for the diaconate and priesthood there is a hidden process of personal reflection leading the candidate to ask to begin the process of discernment and formation.

The bishop then asks if those entrusted with the formation of the candidate deem him to be worthy of ordination. Granted that no one is really worthy of ordination, this simply is an enquiry concerning whether the candidate, as well as can be known by those entrusted with his formation, is ready to proceed.

The bishop will only ordain someone if he is confident that a thorough process of discernment and formation has taken place, involving those specially entrusted with this task, but also the wider community of faith. A good and faithful deacon or priest can do enormous good, but if a candidate is admitted who has unworthy motives, or who has a potential to harm others, then he can cause enormous suffering by misusing the sacred position of trust which is at the heart of ordained ministry. Candidates for the diaconate and priesthood undergo years of spiritual, human, pastoral

and intellectual preparation, and a rigorous scrutiny of their suitability.

If those concerned with his formation certify that the candidate is worthy, then the bishop calls him to the diaconate: "We rely on the help of the Lord God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, and we choose this man, our brother, for the order of deacon."

AN ACT OF GOD

As with the priesthood, a call to ordination to the diaconate is not just an internal subjective sense of being called. It is an act of God through the Church, through the call of the bishop. A person may think he is being called to ordination, but the call is not real unless the bishop confirms it, for ordination is not a private thing, for one's own benefit. It always is rooted in the life of the whole community of faith.