

Homily for the 7th Sunday of Easter

Earlier today at St. Patrick Cathedral in Harrisburg, Bishop Gainer ordained five men to the transitional diaconate – men, who God-willing, will be ordained next year to the priesthood! The origin of the order of deacon is presented in the 6th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, and recounts how some of the widows that the early Christian community was caring for were being neglected in the distribution of food. The Apostles, realizing that they already had more than enough to do in their ministry of preaching the Gospel and baptizing, were inspired to appoint seven reputable men to this task of service. In fact, the Greek word *diakonoi*, from which we get our word ‘deacon’, literally means “waiter”. And these first deacons did that – served food to those who were in need.

Well, to highlight this role of our Diocese’s newest deacons being on the other side of the serving tray in service to God’s people, Bishop Gainer told the story of his own experience once with serving at table. In his day, during their summer breaks from seminary, seminarians were not stationed in parishes (as they often are today), but instead got summer jobs. As many of his classmates got jobs waiting tables at the Jersey shore – in particular, Wildwood – so, Bishop Gainer worked one summer as a waiter at an Italian restaurant. He shared with us that his uniform was a blue shirt, white pants, and what he termed a ‘Neapolitan cummerbund’ – if you can picture that. While he learned a lot of skills serving as a waiter, the one he never quite perfected was getting tomato sauce stains out of white pants!

Well, I was thinking about these two realities – how the early Christians came to learn the need for the diaconal ministry in the life of the early Church, and how Bishop Gainer learned so much from that summer job – and I came to realize that as believers we have so much to learn about the treasure that we call prayer.

Our Scripture readings today highlight the centrality of prayer. In the Book of Acts, our first reading, we heard how the 11 Apostles discerned the need to replace Judas, who had betrayed Jesus. And so they prayed, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two [men] you have chosen to take the place in this apostolic ministry.” This was a big deal – to replace one of the twelve – and yet they turn it over to God in prayer. And Jesus Himself, praying for His own disciples in today’s Gospel from John, says, “Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are one.” He knew all that those disciples were going to face, and yet He turned it all over to His Father in prayer.

Prayer is such a life-line, such a source of strength, such a means of finding and receiving consolation from God, such an opportunity for God’s grace to overshadow us. In the words of the great St. Louis de Montfort, “God is a spring of living water which flows unceasingly into the hearts of those who pray.” The Catholic tradition is so rich with all different methods and forms of prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit over the centuries. And yet despite all of this, I wonder how many of us really know how to pray – how to really turn ourselves over to God.

One of the biggest things I believe that would help every single one of you individually, that would help all of your families, and that would help our parish community to grow, would be to take cultivating a daily prayer life seriously. Said another way – seeking to really have a daily personal relationship with God – of being in communion with Him throughout the day. Sometimes we limit prayer just to asking God for something, like when someone's sick or in need; or praying scripted prayers like the Our Father, the Hail Mary, or the Glory Be; or reading the Bible or another prayer book. These are all ways to pray – yes – but, they are merely means to an end. They are a means of structuring and fostering a real conversation of one sort or another between us and God. So, for example, if I fly through the rosary while I'm driving my car back from the deacon ordinations, like I did today, have I really prayed? Well, technically. But, what did that prayer accomplish? Did that prayer really draw me closer to God? Did I really focus on turning things over to Him? Or did I just say the words?

While our time in prayer will be as individual as each of us is unique, for me I set aside time every morning and begin by praising God – thanking Him for His goodness and blessings – singing a hymn or Christian song. Then, I’ll often just sit in silence – just allowing God to bring from my inner heart to my conscious mind what’s going on inside of me. As St. Faustina Kowalksa of Divine Mercy devotion fame once said: “In order to hear the voice of God, one has to have silence in one’s soul and to keep silence.” Then, as a result of what comes forth from that time of silence and listening – which doesn’t always happen as neatly and orderly as I just described it – I start talking to God about those things – about those fears, about those needs, about those problems, issues, worries, doubts, people, places, or things. And, I just turn it all over to Him so that He can be Lord over all of those things. As we pray in the Our Father after all “Thy will be done”! Then, sometimes I’ll read from the Bible, or reflect on a passage from a devotional or prayer book, or any one of a number of things. The important point is that we give God quality time each and every single day – time that is just *our* time together.

My friends, prayer does matter – 100%. As our Scripture readings today and the writings of the saints testify to again and again, “Anytime anybody...came to God with an honest heart, God responded.” If you are faithful to trying to cultivate a life of prayer in such a way, I can promise you that God will do amazing things in your life. It will happen according to His timeline and in His ways, but He will be faithful to it. God bless you.