

Homily at the Ordination of Deacons 2006

by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

on Saturday, 10th June 2006

The Gospel story we have just heard - Jesus washing the feet of his disciples – is one of the most telling and beautiful in the New Testament. It is a story, an image, a picture of service; it's about humility and it's about doing something for someone else, being at the service of another. It speaks to all believers about an attitude, a way of being, which is characteristic of Christianity. It speaks of the living out of Christian faith and of our response to the call that comes to us in faith. And it is expressed in the word "*diaconia*".

We tend to identify love as the characteristic Christian virtue and it is very significant that in his first encyclical - *Deus Caritas Est* – "God is love", the Pope situated *diaconia* in the context of his profound reflection on Christian love. Speaking about the question of how the early Church sought to be a communion of love, he says:

"A decisive step in the difficult search for ways of putting this fundamental ecclesial principle into practice is illustrated in the choice of the seven, which marked the origin of the diaconal office (cf *Acts* 6:5-6). In the early Church, in fact, with regard to the daily distribution to widows, a disparity had arisen between Hebrew speakers and Greek speakers. The Apostles, who had been entrusted primarily with 'prayer' (the Eucharist and the liturgy) and the 'ministry of the word', felt overburdened by 'serving tables', so they decided to reserve to themselves the principal duty and to designate for the other task, also necessary in the Church, a group of seven persons. Nor was this group to carry out a purely mechanical work of distribution: they were to be men 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom' (cf *Acts* 6:1-6). In other words, the social service which they were meant to provide was absolutely concrete, yet at the same time it was also a spiritual service; theirs was a truly spiritual office which carried out an essential responsibility of the Church, namely a well-ordered love of neighbour. With the formation of this group of seven, '*diaconia*' – the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way – became part of the fundamental structure of the Church."

"*Diaconia*" – the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way – became part of the fundamental structure of the Church. The Pope goes on to explore the diaconal dimension of Christian life generally and the specific development of *diaconia* as an institution within the Church, an institution which includes service of the people especially the needy, as well as liturgical service and service of the Word of God.

The main theme of the encyclical is directly relevant to the ministry of *diaconia* since it is an exploration of the nature of Christian love. The Pope speaks about the two words in the New Testament that we translate as "love", namely "*agape*" and "*eros*". *Eros* normally means love based on mutual attraction and *agape* means love in the sense of reaching out to others for their sake. Recently, we had in the Cathedral the Mass for married couples celebrating jubilees and I said that Christian marriage is a context in which *eros* grows and deepens into *agape*. And in Confirmation Masses I often say that the particular gifts people have are indications of the ways in which people are called to live out the great commandment of love. The service we do in the Church is an expression of love. The Pope himself, the Servant of the Servants of God, has a ministry of service to the whole Church. A bishop is at the service of his diocese, a priest at the service of his parish. Religious life is a life of love within the framework or context of a specific community and, as I've already mentioned, married life is a context for growth of love responding to the demands and needs of children, parents and the wider community.

Diaconal service is integral to the whole life of the Church and I would say that the order of deacons is the privileged institutional focus and expression of that crucial dimension of Christian life.

The diaconate, of course, like any ministry, is worked out and lived out in different ways depending on local circumstances and situations, the particular needs of the parish, the configuration of gifts and talents of priests, of religious and of lay collaborators. And it will develop, grow, change, as time goes on, with new circumstances, new people. And it's important, therefore, for all of us in the ordained ministry that we maintain and foster the inner freedom and detachment that can enable us to respond flexibly and creatively in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

But there are fixed points. There are givens of the diaconal ministry that are constants because they are part of the ministry itself. One is ministry at the altar and the particular tasks that are proper to the deacon within the liturgy of the Church. And there is the role of preaching the Word of God which is vital because life-giving. And this is an area of the ministry in which all of us need to grow and develop. It falls to us to hear the Word of God

ourselves and to communicate it to others. To mediate the Word of life – not our own opinions or agendas – but what we have received from the Word of God ourselves. The process of preaching has been described as “*contemplare et contemplata aliis dare*”. To contemplate and to give to others what has been contemplated. Hence the crucial importance of the Scriptures in our lives, and specially the Office, and the Lectionary. We need to be fed ourselves if we are to feed others. We need constantly to return to the Scripture, to its witness and its message because we typically stray from it in our lives and in our minds. But the Scriptures must be at the heart of our prayer: there we will find wisdom that is much greater than our own fears and fantasies, our own strategies and projects.

And the other thing that is important for preaching is knowing our people: knowing the situation, the circumstances, the context of those to whom we have a preaching ministry. And taking that one step further, the life of service means knowing and being involved with the local community, with our people in their homes, in hospitals, schools, prisons, other institutions and especially seeking out those who are in particular need like the sick, the elderly.

So a rich and varied ministry that makes up the profile of the deacon: altar, word, and service. It will find its particular pattern and definition in your particular circumstances and will involve challenge and trouble as well as joy and fulfilment. Life is like that. It is my prayer that your ministry will be recognised, acknowledged and richly blessed; and for understanding and reassurance we can always go back to the scene in the Gospel we have heard.

The Last Supper, assisting at table, listening to the Word of the Lord. It’s all there. We thank God for this ministry and pray that it will grow and consolidate within the life of the Church. And I pray that you yourselves will be blessed and find happiness in this special ministry of service to God and to others.

Amen.