

Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez
For the Diaconate Ordination of Martin Ibeh
Christ the King Parish, Jacksonville
November 18, 2017

Rejoice, rejoice in the Good Shepherd who chose Martin to serve his vineyard. He is called to proclaim Jesus Christ to all so that in his name many may have life in abundance.

I rejoice because God led this consecrated man to the Diocese of St. Augustine – How? The Lord like in Jeremiah stirred in his heart a kind of “restlessness” – asking the Lord where do you want me to serve you? And then he finds his rector, Father John Horn, S.J. who tells him, “why don’t you explore the Diocese of Augustine?” And the exploration was indeed blessed and fruitful!

Martin, you have witnessed a great love for the Lord, not seeking self, but finding him – as the love of your life – the beloved bridegroom.

Martin, become a priest servant, a shepherd like Jesus – sent to evangelize, to heal, to love with compassion for God’s people especially for those hurting, or who have lost the way, those who adore false gods, seeking idols of wealth, pleasure, fame, power over others.

The order of the diaconate seeks to witness the joy of humble service.

1. A service rooted in a profound listening to God’s word – with openness and passion, that is internalizing the Word as the ordination ritual mentions it for the servant to enable “his words in your mouth” – as the Bishop presents you the Book of the Gospel. May you become an instrument of the truth, keeping like Mary the Word in your heart – your effectiveness as teacher/catechist/homilist will not be measured by your “eloquence” but by being truly transparent aiming for the Word to be totally imbued in your whole being.
2. Martin, today you embrace a mandate to be at the service of prayer – especially by the faithful dedication to pray the Liturgy of the Hours for the sake of the people of God on the move. It will take courage to surrender day in and day out your time for days and nights to be lifted up as an offering of praise and intercession with the ardent hope that God becomes all in all.

As St. Augustine would say, in the praying of the psalms, it is Christ praying in you, through you, with you, and after all sanctifying you.

Bishop Anthony Taylor of Arkansas recently told our priests in retreat: “ I promised to pray daily the Liturgy of the Hours...the solemn promise I did on my diaconate ordination cannot be taken lightly.” The wisdom of the Church is persistent in asking the candidates of holy orders to acquire well this habit of praying all the hours – before one is ordained a priest, the six-month interval required between diaconate and priesthood may have this expected practice as a consistent habit before the priestly ordination takes place.

3. The care of the poor is an important landmark of the Deacon identity. Realizing how the care of the poor is a most salient feature in the ministry of Deacons, how opportune is the timing of Martin’s ordination. It is just hours before the celebration of the first Day of the Poor recently summoned by Pope Francis. It is in this context of the “la cultura del

encuentro,” that is not only sharing goods for the poor but seeking to be with the poor. The logo of the pope’s campaign shows one person (male or female) leaving home, moving out of his or her comfort zone to encounter the other who is not to be perceived as a problem but a gift – for he or she makes real the promise “blessed are the poor...”

It is good to remember today the martyrdom of Deacon St. Lawrence of ancient Rome. He was a treasurer of the pope. He was imprisoned and asked to hand on the treasures of the Church. St Lawrence replied, “...here are the poor – they are the true treasure of the Church.”

In his message for the first World Day of the Poor, Pope Francis said: “...All the poor – as Blessed Paul VI loved to say – belong to the Church by “evangelical right,” and require of us a fundamental option on their behalf. Blessed, therefore, are the open hands that embrace the poor and help them: they are hands that bring hope. Blessed are the hands that reach beyond every barrier of culture, religion, and nationality, and pour the balm of consolation over the wounds of humanity. Blessed are the open hands that ask nothing in exchange, with no “ifs” or “buts” or “maybes” – they are hands that call down God’s blessing upon their brothers and sisters.” (Address to the Opening of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, 29 September 1963)

The first Day of the Poor – taking place the day after receiving the sacrament of holy orders is providentially a pressing invitation to be a friend of the poor, to all of those in need.

Hans Urs von Balthasar says, “God gives us many things only so that we will sacrifice them to him. He assumed a body only in order to sacrifice it on the cross and nourish us with it.” (Cf. *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 1995)

That’s why the sacrament of holy orders is celebrated together with the Mass. It is the sacramental expression of the victorious sacrifice, the paschal mystery which St. John anticipated in the last Supper by an act of supreme act of service and humility, the Lord washing the feet of his disciples (Jo. 13, 6-11).

The joy of Martin’s total gift to the Lord ... the joy of self-giving in true Eucharistic love conveyed by the Good Shepherd in his saying: “no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (Jo. 10:18). Love is perfected in freedom – it is also the joy of all of us in celebrating this morning this missionary from Africa, becoming a new public servant of the Lord for our sake. His Amen enriches our Amen. We all sing a joyful Amen...the Amen of the Body of Christ to the triune God – in a most joyful doxology of praise.

