

HOMILY FOR THE ORDINATION TO THE PERMAMENT DIACONATE

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FEAST OF ST. SIMON AND ST. JUDE

28th OCTOBER 2015

Who can fail to be moved by the tragic killings we read of day after day in Jerusalem and all over the West Bank of the Jordan? Arab and Jew; Israeli and Palestinian fighting over the same piece of land; the victims of history, politics and religion. Even there, most people would prefer a peaceful and just co-existence to violence and fanaticism. You don't have to know too much history to learn that one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist.

Two thousand years ago, Simon the Zealot lived up to his name. Tradition has it that he belonged to a Freedom Movement of Jewish priests called "*the avenging priests of the Temple*". They revolted against the Emperor Quirinius who was the hated symbol of Roman occupation of Israel. Jude Thaddeus may well have belonged to the same group who longed for a Messiah who would be a political and religious leader bringing that version of God's freedom to this oppressed people. Jesus called these two, and ten others, to be apostles. As disciples, they had first to learn the difference between misplaced Messianic zeal so that they could live and teach the life wisdom which came through following a crucified Messiah, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Tradition also has it that Jude preached the gospel in Armenia, Syria and Northern Persia. He is reputed to be buried in the city of Tabriz, in modern day Iraq. As we know, there is still plenty of fundamentalist killing in those places still.

Jesus called these two 'zealous' disciples to be apostles. The lessons in discipleship they had to learn weren't quiet catechetical instructions, or Confirmation classes, or marriage preparation with which we are familiar. These were lessons for life, lessons which would change their lives forever forever, especially when they witnessed the torture, crucifixion and death of Jesus who went about doing good.

Our new deacon has been a disciple as, indeed, all of us are called to be. Like us he has had to listen and learn and make the teaching of Jesus his own, not just something to be read of in books or put into practice when we come into the church. Through his ordination as a deacon he becomes an apostle, he joins the apostolic order of the Church. He is 'sent' on behalf of Christ to be Christ's presence in a particular way, 'orientated' 'focussed' 'directed' '

or 'ordered' to the service of God's people so that they might become 'The Body of Christ' in this place. He has to remind those people, as Paul said in the first reading, that they are no longer aliens, or foreign visitors. That they are citizens like all the saints, and part of God's household.

As part of that apostolic mission, Michael will no longer speak or act on his own authority. His words and actions must be those of Christ because if people do not see and hear Christ in him and his service, he will have failed to be Christ to them and to others. The preaching of a deacon, and of a priest, and of the bishop, is not the sum total of his personal thoughts or insights. God forbid! Pope Francis puts it so well when he says *"Whilst addressing the deepest needs of the human heart, the homily surpasses all forms of catechesis as the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people which lead up to sacramental communion"*. (Evangelium Gaudium par 137). The Pope goes on to remind the preacher that he has to be a disciple too, in asking himself *"...what does this text say to me? What is about my life that I wish to be changed by these words? What troubles me about this passage? What is it about these words that move me"*. (Evangelii Gaudium par 153). It is only if the preacher can answer those questions for himself that he dare to challenge and support others in discovering their meaning. There is more to preaching than standing in a pulpit or event sitting in a chair!

That is why this ordination is filled with powerful sacramental symbolism. The laying on of hands and prayer of consecration bind the deacon to the apostolic ministry of the bishop. The clothing with the deacon's stole is a reminder of the responsibilities he must carry and the people he must sustain in faith. It expresses the words of Jesus *"My yoke is easy and my burden light"*. The dalmatic is shaped like a cross, a reminder to the one who wears it of the suffering of Christ and the deacon's role not just in preaching Christ crucified but that he will make himself an offering acceptable to God.

The teachings of the gospel which have to be absorbed by every disciple and its public preaching by a share in the apostolic ministry is contained in the words spoken by the bishop as the Book of the Gospels is presented to the new Deacon:

Believe what you read.

Teach what you believe

And practice what you teach.

Amen.