



Homily for the Ordination of Deacons
16 June 2018 – St. Richard of Chichester
Allen Hall Seminary, London

Archbishop George Stack

It is a happy coincidence that this Diaconal ordination is being held on the Memorial of St. Richard of Chichester. Happy for Chinedu, Ian and Laurence as they are ordained to the diaconate. A coincidence in that Richard of Chichester was a great friend of St. Edmund of Abingdon, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1233 – 1240. St. Edmund's College and Allen Hall flourished under his patronage before moving to this site of the home of another great English saint in 1975. Richard accompanied Edmund on the journey he made to Rome in 1240. He went to complain about King Henry III, the machinations of corrupt politicians and the quality of life, or should I say lack of quality of life, of his clergy. There is nothing new under the sun! Unfortunately, Edmund didn't make it Rome, but died in Pontigny where his shrine still stands today- although his tibia (or is it his fibula) is still venerated in a reliquary at St. Edmund's College.

Richard was elected Bishop of Chichester in 1244. Henry III refused to recognise him because of ongoing conflicts with the Pope. More seriously, some of the members of his own Chapter in Chichester refused to accept him either. Little wonder that Richard issued directives condemning corrupt clergy and priests who mumbled the Mass. He wrote that priests were to celebrate Mass in clean robes, on thoroughly clean corporals, and ensure the cross was placed on the altar. Practices such as gambling at baptisms or marriages was

strictly prohibited in the Diocese of Chichester – and still are in the Dioceses of Cardiff and Portsmouth, although I’m not sure about the Congregation of the Mission!

Those being ordained to the diaconate today will know that this is not just a transitional ministry on the way to priesthood. The bishop and the priest retain the diaconal office whilst they minister to God’s people, empowering them to fulfil their baptismal role as a priestly people. A telling reminder of that truth is given by Pope Francis when he washes feet at the Mass of Chrism and takes off his vestments to reveal the deacon’s stole. In sharing in the Sacrament of Orders, the deacon is authorised and empowered to order, direct, focus the attention of the people on their dignity as baptised members of the Body of Christ.

The deacon is called to help the people, and himself, to *“judge wisely the things of earth and measure them by the things of heaven”*. Our new deacons will do that not just through their preaching and teaching but in the conduct of their lives. One way you will do this is by the gift you make of your right to intimacy, to marriage and to human fatherhood. The promise of celibacy which you make today is an expression of the total gift of self which you make to God and to his people.

Another sign is the promise of obedience which you make to the bishop in the name of the Church. The word obedience comes from “ob audire”. To turn a listening ear. In a world of confused and confusing messages, in a life of complex emotions, it is sometimes difficult to hear the authentic word of God speaking and inviting us to respond. That is the importance of those lovely words of Cardinal Newman: *“Heart speaking to heart”*. And as Canon Stuart Wilson knows, I always add the words “in the silence of the heart”. Obedience is born of the freedom which comes from a wholehearted faith and trust, an expression of the virtue of hope that God’s purpose is being worked out through His Church. That, surely, is the meaning of the questions put to each candidate at this ordination:

“Will you hold the mystery of faith with a clear conscience? Will you maintain and deepen a spirit of prayer? Will you shape your life in accordance with the example of Christ.” - “I am. I will. I do, with the help of God”.

And then to remind yourself that you hold this treasure in earthenware vessels, you prostrate yourself before the altar whilst we pray *“Bless this chosen man”*. You will no doubt think: *“Lord, I am not worthy”*. Or perhaps: *“Here I am, Lord,*

I come to do your will". That prostration is a gesture of self-emptying and humility. It is a gesture of abandonment and trust. It is a sign of your willingness to be filled with the power and the love of God who has begun the good work in you and will bring it to fulfilment.

The laying on of hands links you to the teaching and ministry of the apostles. It is accompanied by the beautiful words of the Prayer of Consecration:

*"May he remain steadfast in Christ,
Giving to the world a witness of a true conscience"*.

As the stole is put on your shoulder the words of Jesus speak to you directly *"My yoke is easy and my burden is light"*.

The conclusion of the ordination of a deacon, or is it the beginning, is when the Book of the Gospels is handed to you with the words *"Receive the gospel of Christ whose herald you now are"*. You will already have had a glimpse of the power of preaching the gospel. But as a deacon you will have privileged access into the lives of the people you serve. You will learn that the best sermon you preach will not just be with words, or from the pulpit, or the bishop's chair, but the

sermon which is your life. *“There, I am putting my words into your mouth”*. (Jer.1:9). The bishop is instructed to say to you at this moment:

“Believe what you read.

Teach what you believe,

Practice what you teach.”

Amen.
