

5th Sunday of Easter – A

Last December, three young men from our diocese were ordained transitional deacons, and then last February I believe four men were ordained permanent deacons for our diocese. As its name suggests, a transitional deacon is one who is not a permanent one; i.e., the men who were ordained transitional deacons will soon be ordained as priests.

I mention this because our first reading this weekend is has to do with the selection and the ordination of the first deacons of the Church. It explains why the apostles decided it was necessary to create this ministry of the diaconate: there was a dispute within the Church. So even from the very beginning, there have been disputes within the Church. I think we tend to idealize the early Church or imagine that everything was pretty perfect and harmonious, but as we all know, where two or more are gathered, there is conflict. (As opposed to the words of Jesus: “Where are two

or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”)

This conflict we hear about in our first reading is between Greek-speaking Jews who have become Christians (the Hellenists) and Aramaic-speaking Jews who have become Christians (the Hebrews). The Hellenists felt that their widows, who like all widows at that time were completely dependent on the good will of others because no other options were available to them, were being neglected in favor of the Hebrew widows. So the apostles, unable to dedicate the time necessary for this service, established the ministry of the diaconate. The word deacon comes from a Greek word essentially meaning “to serve.” So the role of the deacon is one of service to the priests, to assist them in their duties, and especially of service to the lay faithful. This service encompasses preaching, baptizing, catechizing, and works of charity. For hundreds of years, the permanent diaconate essentially

disappeared from the Church, and was later restored following the Second Vatican Council.

I also want to mention the upcoming feast of Our Lady of Fatima, which we celebrate on May 13, one of my personal favorite feast days. Our Blessed Mother first appeared to three poor, young shepherd children, named Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco on May 13, 1917, while they were tending their families' flock of sheep in the fields near a little hamlet named Fatima in Portugal. She appeared to them a total of six times, once a month until October of that year, each time on the 13th of that month, except for in August, when instead she appeared on August 15, which is of course the feast of the Assumption of Mary into heaven.

God chose to send Mary the mother of his son Jesus to three poor, illiterate children, ages 7, 8, and 10, to communicate a message of worldwide importance. Mary gave to these three children a message for the pope and for all of humanity. Which

has long intrigued me. If God had such an important message for the world, why didn't He send Mary directly to the pope, or one of the cardinals, or perhaps a bishop? But instead, in His wisdom which is so far beyond our understanding, He sent Mary to these three completely unknown children, who still had not yet learned to read, and were living in a poor, forgotten corner of Europe.

And there is a lot about the message that Mary communicated to them that is very dark. There was a vision of hell and ominous messages about the spread of Communism throughout the world about how the First World War, which was raging at the time elsewhere in Europe and was the worst war the world had known up to that time, would be followed by another and even worse war within a generation. There was a secret message for the pope so serious that it was only made public in 2000.

But in the end, Mary gave the children a message of hope: she told the children that eventually her Immaculate Heart would triumph. And at its heart, the message of Our Lady of Fatima is a plea for conversion of hearts and of the necessity of prayer and penance for the conversion of sinners and for peace. The Blessed Mother urged the children to pray and to pray much for the conversion of hearts and for peace. These two things go together. Every sin is in some way a rejection of God. It is characterized by a lack of love for God and for others. It produces nothing good. And eventually, sin can build up, and left unchecked, leads to violence and to war – the ultimate rejection of God and of humanity. So conversion of hearts and peace naturally go together.

This is the true message of Fatima. Unfortunately its message is sometimes hijacked by conspiracy theorists and distorted to focus on its more sensational aspects. But Mary's role is very simple: to be a heavenly mother to all of us, and as our Mother, to

lead us her to Son Jesus. True devotion to Mary should always lead us to Jesus. If not, then something is amiss in our devotion. Mary's only desire is to bring us to Jesus.

And that brings us to our Gospel. Jesus tells us: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Just as Mary leads us to her Son, Jesus is the way to the Father. And He is the only way to the Father, whether we realize it or not. And unity with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is precisely what we were created for – nothing else. Mary wants to lead us into a deeper relationship with her Son Jesus, and that happens through prayer. That is why she urged the children at Fatima to pray much. Because when we pray, we grow closer to Jesus. But to say "we grow closer to Jesus" is kind of a tepid way of describing what really happens: we *fall in love* with Jesus. Our love for Jesus, which might be just a dry little seed, suddenly begins to sprout and grow. It just sits there in the darkness, underground in

the dirt, all winter. And then in the spring, with rain, sunshine, and warmer weather, it suddenly begins to respond, and before you know it a little green shoot has popped out of the earth. And it grows and eventually produces a beautiful flower. If a flower represents our love for Jesus, then the rain, the sunshine, and the warmth represents prayer, which makes our love for Christ begin to grow.

And when that happens, as Jesus tells us, “Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father.” Jesus is now with the Father in heaven, and he has commissioned us to carry on his work here in the world, his work of love and of bringing others to the Father through him. How can we do greater works than him though? I answer by saying, look at the Church. Jesus gathered around him in his lifetime a pretty small group of followers. Some scholars say it was probably no more than a few hundred people.

But after He had ascended into heaven and sent his Holy Spirit upon his disciples, the Acts of the Apostles tell us that immediately hundreds and then thousands more people became Christians.

And now the Church has spread throughout the world. The sacrifice of the Mass is being offered constantly on thousands and thousands of altars around the world.

We are called to continue the work begun by Jesus and continued by his apostles and by Christians throughout the ages. Let us do so by asking Mary to lead us closer to her Son, praying for the ongoing conversion of our own hearts, for the conversion of the whole world, and for peace.

- **May 3, 2026 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**