

**“Servants of God’s Dwelling Place and Friends Dwelling in God’s Presence”  
Homily for Mass of Ordination to the Transitional Diaconate  
Church of St. Pius X, Redwood City  
August 8, 2020**

**Introduction**

If you knew you were going to die and could leave one instruction to the world, what would it be? We know what it would be for Our Lord. The gospel passage we heard is a segment of His Farewell Discourse that He gave to His Apostles that night before He died. And we hear what His dying instruction is to us: “This I command you, love one another.”

**Being Friends**

He could not be more emphatic that here He is giving the ultimate commandment. And it is one which He Himself fulfills: to love each other to the point of giving up one’s life. He did that first, and now instructs His followers to do the same. But He takes this love to a new level. He also says here, “I no longer call you slaves. I have called you friends.”

It is already a great thing to be a slave, or servant, of God; indeed, it is a title of honor in the Bible. We can think of the honor roll of those whom the Bible calls “servants of God”: Moses, Joshua, David, Paul, James. And even to this day in the Church, in that process toward beatification, when one is recognized as having had heroic virtue and is declared venerable, the person attains the title “Servant of God.” So that is already something very great, but now Jesus presents something even greater. And we can see here, with Him calling them “friends” and with the connection between love and friendship, how profound that love of friendship is: “No one has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.” This exhortation to love He repeats all throughout even these few verses.

He then says, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” He first loved us, and His love makes the Christian beloved. Thus, the idea is that obedience to Christ’s command naturally flows from being loved by Him. We do not make ourselves His friends by our efforts, but we show that we are His friends by loving one another as He has loved us. If we do not love like Him, we lose friendship with Him. This is how Our Lord makes this love of friendship not something purely horizontal – some sort of affection between people – but a love that begins with Him and flows from Him and is returned to Him through our loving of one another.

What is the characteristic activity of friendship? Well, the first thing that comes to my mind is that friends always want to spend time with each other. We want to enjoy the company of our friends. We see this affection of friendship reflected in the prayer of the Psalmist that we prayed at Mass today: “Blessed are they who dwell in your house, O Lord.” This psalm speaks to us of the importance of God’s house, the sweetness of dwelling within His sacred place, of spending time there, relishing God’s presence.

### **The Appointment of Levites**

For deacons, this means something even more. We see this prefigured in the Old Testament, which speaks about the Levites, the Old Testament anticipation of what became the Order of Deacons, who are often called “Levites” in the language of our liturgical tradition. What was the role of the Levites? The book of Numbers tells us, “They shall have custody of all the furnishings of the meeting tent and discharge the duties and the service of the dwelling.” Levites were to have care of God’s house, preserving it as a sacred place. The deacons of the New Covenant are the descendants of these original Levites. The Prayer of Ordination remembers before God that “as once You chose the *sons of Levi* to minister in the former

tabernacle, God's dwelling place, so in the first days of Your Church, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Your Son's Apostles appointed seven men of good repute to assist them in the daily ministry." The role of the deacon has always been marked by this being entrusted with the temporal administration of the Church's goods. The temporal and the sacred meet especially in God's house, His dwelling place. Therefore, zeal for the sacredness of God's house is to characterize the life of the deacon.

Notice that the Prayer of Ordination speaks to God about how "Your Son's Apostles *appointed* seven men." It uses this word "appointed". We have this word already in the Farewell Discourse, when Our Lord says, "I chose you and *appointed* you to go and bear fruit that will remain." This verb "appoint" is the same verb as "lay down," used earlier in this section of John's gospel. Thus, we see the connection between the commission of the disciples and the example of love that Jesus gave them by *laying down* His life. It becomes quite apparent: their mission is to do for others what He has done for them. Thus, there is this aspect of going and bearing fruit. There is relishing God's presence in God's house, but then also going forth to bear fruit.

This word "appoint" is also used in the Old Testament in passages that have to do with commissioning and ordination. And, here again, Jesus does it first and gives us an example. Recall Peter's discourse from the Acts of the Apostles, where Peter says that "Jesus commissioned us to testify that He is the one *appointed* by God as judge of the living and the dead." Jesus is the one *appointed*. He is the one who *laid down* His life. And so He now judges the living and the dead.

## **God's Dwelling**

Jesus told us that He dwells among us as one who serves and that He came not to be served but to serve. Therefore, when we become friends with Our Lord, we do not cease to be servants; we are servants *and* friends. Christians have always thought of themselves as servants. We address Jesus as “Lord,” which implies that we are His servants. So in New Testament thought, the Christian remains a servant from the viewpoint of the service that he should render. But from the viewpoint of the intimacy with God, he is more than a servant, he is friend; he is privy to this intimate relationship with God that Our Lord has opened up for us.

Friends want to dwell in each other’s presence, but they also want to share their friendship with others. When you have someone as a friend, someone really special, really important, a really great person, you want to share that with others. In this way, deacons are called, through the witness of their service, to be publicly-appointed ambassadors for the Church and share that love of Jesus with others. In addition to friends wanting to spend time with each other and share company, friendship is also characterized by loyalty, staying true to one’s friends through thick and thin. Perhaps we have lost this in our contemporary idea of friendship, but this is what it means to be a friend of the Lord: to relish the time spent in His company and want to bring that to others.

Dear sons, your diaconate ordination today takes on an even greater significance, in that it is carried out, God willing, in view of your eventual configuration to Christ the High Priest. As such, you will be bound even more closely to the service of God’s dwelling place, particularly His altar. This requires of you the renunciation of any activity which seeks an exclusively profane end so that you may dedicate yourselves more intensely to the service of the sacred. Priestly ordination will mean for you not a promotion, but a fulfillment of the vocation God has already planted in your heart. That is, the priest does not cease being a servant, but on

the contrary, he becomes a servant in a more complete sense because his priestly character qualifies him to be entrusted with the full care of souls.

This is the purpose of the promise of celibacy to which you will commit yourselves in receiving diaconate ordination today. I want to take this opportunity to thank you for responding to God's call and persevering to this point, and we pray God's grace might continue to accompany you as you serve Him. I also want to take this opportunity to thank all of those who have had such an important role in your formation, this journey to the Priesthood, most especially the faculty and staff of St. Patrick's Seminary.

Thank you, Father Pius Pietrzyk, O.P., for being with us today to represent the Rector and call the candidates to Orders. (And happy feast day today on the feast day of St. Dominic!) To all of the faculty, our readers Dr. Lilles and Dr. Turek, Father George Schultze: thank you for being here today. I thank in particular Father George, former Rector and longtime faculty member, who had such a positive influence on our men serving today and preparing for ordination.

## **Conclusion**

It is a day of great thanksgiving. Most of all, we thank you, our brothers, for your "yes" to God. In fulfilling your promises of ordination, you will prove yourselves servants and friends of Christ and His People, laying down your lives for them in a total gift of self, identifying yourselves with your Lord, who is the Bridegroom of the Church, and like Him, taking His Church as your one love for all of life.