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St. Lawrence Day Mass with the Diaconate
Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish
Independence, Missouri
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Dear Brother Deacons, Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On the day of your ordination, your name was called out. With great conviction, trust in God and generous faith, you stood and answered, "Present!" I myself have done this three times – at my ordinations as deacon, priest, and bishop. Your brother priests and I still count ourselves Deacons, ready to exercise the ministry of the Gospel, and of charity. Standing up on our ordination day is a very special moment when we not only affirm that we are here, but much more. We present ourselves to the Lord and for service to His Church. It is a moment of self-giving that we intend to be a true and complete offering.

In this my first formal gathering with you since becoming bishop of our Diocese, I want to affirm my solidarity with you, my brother deacons. The Fathers tell us the bishop has two arms. While my earthly arms may not be so strong and productive, the two that the Church gives me certainly are! The two arms of the bishop are the priests and the deacons. And this is how I must depend on you to carry forward the work of the local Church. And this is how you must see yourself – as attached firmly to the bishop expressly for the work of the Church. The deacon in this analogy is not "under" the priest" but is his generous co-worker. And if anyone tried to carry out the hard work of carrying the load, or trying to lift up what had fallen with one arm alone, he would quickly realize that his work would be limited if not impossible. In this way priests and deacons must determine to work together – seeing each other as indispensable for the work of the Church.

It must be acknowledged that the priests are my right arm. Without them I can do almost nothing meaningful for the day to day needs of God's people. But neither would I want to attempt to carry out my work without the deacons. Dear brother priest and deacons, work together with each other and with me for the good of the Church!

I also wish to express my esteem and gratitude to your wives and families, particularly for sharing you so generously with the Church, the whole people of God. Deacons' wives make many sacrifices. I have often talked to them about the long hours that their ordained husbands spend – first in their formation – but then in their special ministry to parish and in many other apostolates. We always encourage the wives to participate in the ministry of their deacon-husbands, but when all is said and done, there are times when the Deacon must meet those who call to him as a singular representative of Jesus Christ who came to serve and not be served. Wives and families, I am especially mindful of you when you sit in that pew on Sunday, no longer in exactly the same way aside your husband. You also make a sacrificial offering to God in supporting your deacon.

I also wish to greet and encourage the men who are now in formation. This special time is very

demanding. Doing what amounts to graduate studies – sometimes many years after leaving the life of a full-time student, and attempting to keep all the responsibilities of family and the ministry of charity is not easy. We all know that it can only be fruitful if it is grounded in a faithful prayer life. This is perhaps the most important part of your formation. It cannot be neglected, because none of us does the work of God without God or by sheer will-power. These efforts can only bear fruit in union with Him who said, “Without me you can do nothing!” (Jn 15:5) and keeping in mind St. Paul’s words, “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.” (Phil 4:13)

You have had good formation, and I am intent that as it goes forward it will be the best we can provide. No deacons I have worked with over the years have shunned the hard work of formation. They do not want to go forth among God’s people with anything less than the best formation available. May you persevere in accord with God’s vocation for you.

Today I also want to acknowledge in gratitude to God those of our number who are celebrating special jubilees in God’s service and to commend in a special way those who are adding another title to their name, namely the word “emeritus” or “retired.” I am sorry to say we, the ordained, never retire. Our promises – as you well know and yourselves are quick to reaffirm – are for always. I only pray that as your service which is now taking a new direction will be more mature and – if it is possible – even more recollected and prayerful. It is, again, in this spiritual fortification that we prepare for the true battles of life. In our role as clergy we accept a particular advocacy for our brothers and sisters in Christ, by which we never stop praying for their perseverance and sanctification.

For the sake of those times when we feel that we are at times alone – when we walk into the prison, or into the hospital room, or into the parlor to counsel a couple in crisis, we have the words of today’s Gospel. These are words that strengthened St. Lawrence the Deacon-Martyr. They are words that must constantly have been in the mind of the Church’s first martyr, the deacon Stephen. They guided Justin the Deacon Martyr, and resounded in the heart of the deacon and Doctor of the Church, St. Ephrem, and they were as a song in the soul of the deacon St. Francis of Assisi, and many others who join us silently but surely at the altar of Him who died that we might live. “Unless the grain of wheat fall to earth and die, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it yields a great harvest.” This is the firm hope that sustains us. It is the promise of Jesus Christ, who died, and we know His word is true.

How must we give ourselves as these grains of wheat? I must tell you that I am beginning to formulate some thoughts about how I will ask you deacons to assist in light of my continuing assessment of the particular needs of the Diocese. I want to discuss these with you at some gathering soon so that I can first have the benefit of your collaboration. For today I will mention instead three brief thoughts that have more to do with the “spirit” of your ministry. They are these: “A Spirit of Sacrifice,” Joy, and Fidelity and Perseverance.

We must work like that grain of wheat which lets go of its life and falls in a “Spirit of Sacrifice.” We must be willing to wear ourselves out in God’s service – to forget about ourselves. This is what many of you do who are married and, for the care of your families, forego many of the niceties of life. I remember one father of six telling me that he used to buy his shoes at Saks Fifth Avenue, now he shops at Penney’s or Walmart. He went on to say, “It doesn’t bother me.”

One modern day saint says, “We must be like a tiny screw in the great machine that God runs.” The spirit of self-sacrifice is for all Christians, but you must meditate on this even more.

The second quality that must characterize our service is Joy. Would you want someone serving you in a restaurant or as your business rep, who is always moaning and groaning while he served you. As I have begun to fly more than I ever had before, I remember a stewardess on one trans-Atlantic flight. The job of these stewards is very tedious and demanding. On these longer flights especially the stewards work non-stop for eight or more hours, and time is compressed. They finish one run with their food carts and then they are passing out headsets and picking up trash, and getting blankets and pillows. If you watch, it never really stops. She never said a cross word. She kept doing the job and seemed as fresh as ever when we landed. Our work is demanding – and many of you have families as well. Doing what you do with joy requires that you live prayerful lives and have undivided hearts. The Psalmist sings, “Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before Him singing for joy¹”

The third hallmark of our work for the Church must be Fidelity and Perseverance.

We are, in a way, “beasts of burden.” Our service requires day after day perseverance, like donkeys working a mill. They go round and round. Their last day is like their first. In this regard we have some words of encouragement from a good source, Pope Benedict XVI.

Perhaps you have seen the new Pope’s Coat of Arms. I was actually shown it the first time by a young student who had pulled it up on the internet. It includes several elements, but the young man pointed out to me that there is this “thing” on it, that looks like a “bear wearing a backpack!” Sure enough it is just about exactly that. In his biographical book of several years ago entitled “Milestones,” then-Cardinal Ratzinger shows how his coat of arms as bishop of Munich-Friesing has on it the bear from the pious legend of St. Corbinian, who was the saintly first bishop of Friesing. While St. Corbinian was on his way to Rome , a bear tore the saint’s horse to pieces. Then St. Corbinian reprimanded the bear sternly for its crime and as a punishment loaded on it the pack that the horse had been carrying. The bear had to haul the pack all the way to Rome , where it was finally released by the saint.

Bishop Ratzinger noted how St. Augustine saw himself in his work as bishop as a pack animal. St. Augustine wrote, “A draft animal am I before you, and this is precisely how I abide with you.” He has chosen the life of a scholar, Bishop Ratzinger notes, but God had chosen to make him into a draft animal – “a good sturdy ox to pull God’s cart in this world.” Bishop Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI takes this symbol and responsibility as his own. He wrote this year. “I have become your donkey, and in this way I am with you.”

Dear brothers, in Fidelity and Perseverance, we may choose to be the same. If we do, let us never forget the promise of the Lord Jesus: “My yoke is easy and my burden light.”

And every day, let us spring out of bed and cry out “Present!” For you, you may whisper, so as not to wake the family! This precious word that we were privileged to say on our ordination day, is a word that is probably best said deep in the heart. “Lord, I am “present” for you. I am “present” because of you. I am at the service of your Church. May it be for your praise and glory, forever.”